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THE OLD CONTEMPTIBLES

BOYD CABLE

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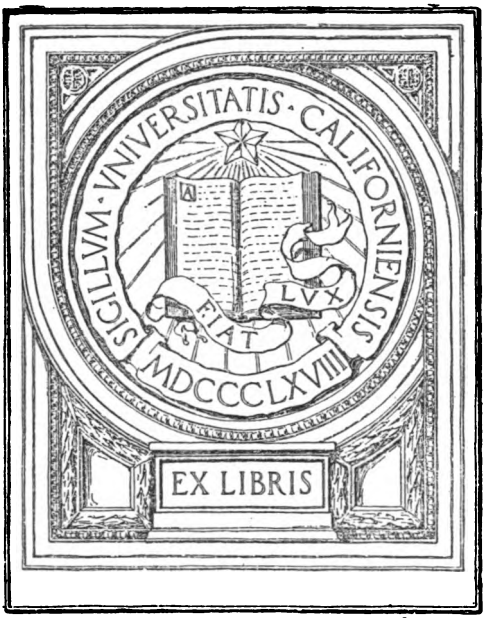

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THE
OLD CONTEMPTIBLES

BY

BOYD CABLE

AUTHOR OF
"BY BLOW AND BLOW," "BETWEEN THE LINES," "DOING THEIR BIT,"
"ACTION FRONT," "GRAPES OF WRATH," "FRONT LINES,"
"AIR MEN 'O WAR"

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

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The Author wishes to acknowledge with thanks the courtesy of the Editors of *The Cornhill Magazine*, *Land and Water*, *The Westminster Gazette*, *The War Illustrated*, and *The British Australasian*, for permission to reprint material which has appeared in their pages.

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TO

THE OLD CONTEMPTIBLES

AND PARTICULARLY TO

OLD FRIENDS AND COMRADES OF THE FIRST DIVISION

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

IN ADMIRATION AND HONOUR BY

THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

PART of this book was written in 1915 and the remainder from time to time since then. It may be thought that the days of which I write here are "ancient history" now, but I should not have felt satisfied to have completed my writings on the War without a book on the men who were first in it. I feel, too, that these tales may serve to record some of the feats of the Old Army and incidents which, because they might not be told at that time, are in danger of going untold. Again, I do not claim to be writing history, but there are many of the tales which will be familiar in substance to the men of 1914 and '15; and I hope they may serve to record some of the feats of the men of the old Regular Army, the spirit in which they went to war, and the undaunted courage and good heart with which they faced incredible hardships and overwhelming odds.

I believe I may claim to be the originator of the title "The Old Contemptibles," and

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because this has now come to be so generally adopted it may be of interest to mention here how I first came to use it.

It was in 1915, in the days before service chevrons and wound stripes gave any indication of a man's service that I heard several men of the New Army talking amongst themselves, referring rather contemptuously to some of the "new hands" then coming along, speaking of Neuve Chapelle and other actions they had been in, doing their best to impress the fact on all around that they were veterans and "old-timers." Another man outside the group had been listening and saying nothing until one man, evidently taking him for a Johnny Raw, asked him how long had he been "out." The position was made clear in a sentence, and without any mention of dates and actions and so on. "I was one o' French's bloomin' old original Contemptibles."

It struck me at the time not only how completely that covered everything, but how very typical it was of the British Army to twist into something to make a pride and a boast the very words the Kaiser had used meaning to belittle and scoff at French's "contemptible little army," and I mentioned

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the incident in an article I wrote for *Land and Water* about this time, and later shortened the phrase to "The Old Contemptibles," and used it as title to a series of tales I was writing for the *Cornhill Magazine*, now reprinted here.

The old professional Army was treated badly and slightingly by the Country. The officers were given labourers' wages and expected to dress and equip themselves and live up to the standard of independent gentlemen. The men out of their niggardly shilling a day had to return 3*d.* or 4*d.* in "Compulsory Stoppages" for "Messing," to provide themselves with food fit to live and do the country's work on, to buy unending pipeclay and polish, and pay repairs to clothing; they had to find their own fares if they went on leave, even on leave prior to or after years of foreign service; their food, housing, and living was of the roughest and coarsest; promotion was deadly slow, and at best at the rate of a few daily pence in periods of years, and a man served more years to gain his "stripes" than they did days in the New Armies; discipline was stern or even harsh, and one trivial military "crime" after many years of hard work and

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undeviating good behaviour, returned a man to the ranks and broke him; and when men had given a full twenty-one years, often for the greater part in unhealthy tropical climates, to the service of their country, they were turned adrift with no trade or training but soldiering and a pension on which they could hardly starve decently—even as to-day the same old Regulars who had "done their twenty-one" before the War, rejoined and served through it, are still being cast aside with exactly the same inadequate pensions.

You must remember all this when you hear or read of the Old Contemptibles, because it counts so much the more to their credit that they so nobly repaid the slights and neglect and bad treatment after the fashion they did in 1914.

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UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

I

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

THE Divisional Ammunition and Supply Columns had done a long march on the Christmas Eve. It was not so much that the distance was long in measured kilometres, but from a point of time, of dragging weariness, of bad roads, of cold and wet and discomfort it was prolonged to a heartbreaking length.

The column had taken the road at daybreak, and this meant that the men had to be on parade a full quarter-hour before, had to turn out of their uncomfortable billets and sleeping-places an hour and a half before the time to parade. In that time they had to pack their kits (a quick enough and simple job, to be sure), put on their wet boots, water and feed their horses, eat a biscuit-and-cheese breakfast, scramble for a "lick and a promise" sort of wash, harness up their teams, pack picketing gear and odd stores on the wagons

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and sheet them over, have themselves and everything belonging to them packed and harnessed and standing ready to turn out promptly to the shout of "Hook in." They were all ready, and with a nicely-timed handful of seconds to spare, when the word came, because the practice that makes perfect had been their regular routine for a good many months past, and there had been plenty of times when they had been obliged to do the same routine in very much less than this present leisured hour and a half.

It was raining when the wagons turned out, formed up on the road, and, dropping into place unit by unit, rolled steadily off on the march. The rain was taken quite philosophically and as a matter of course, as indeed it had come to be by now and any time for a month past. There were a good many even by then who had wondered where all the rain could come from, and held a firm opinion that it must cease very soon, on the reasonable assumption that no rain-supply is inexhaustible and that the past month must have "pretty well emptied the watering-pot." They were to learn for another solid three months almost without a break what the Flanders watering-pot can

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supply when it really sets about the job in earnest, and it was to come to be a standing joke and boast of the first Expeditionaries that you could always tell one of the men who went through that first winter in France because an examination of his toes would show him to be web-footed.

But at the end of December the wet had not been accepted as such a permanent feature of life as it was to become, and there were plenty of men in the column who, as they marched out that Christmas Eve, looked up at the sky and round the grey horizon and tried to find, or persuade themselves and each other they could see, a spot where it was "lifting." But it did not lift, and before long the men's damp clothes, half dried by body heat in sleeping in them, had become soaked and saturated through again. It was cold too, and fingers gripped about the wet reins of their pairs of horses grew numbed and stiff, were periodically revived with much blowing of warm breath—the only item of warmth left about a man—into cupped hands, and arm beating and flapping. The roads were heavy, rutted and inches deep in stiff mud, flooded in parts by the overflow from brimming-over ditches.

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The march was bad enough in its early stages; it became acute in its discomfort as the day wore on, and men and horses grew tired and more tired. By far the worst feature was the constant series of halts. The road taken by the column was filled for miles with a slow-crawling and packed procession of horses and wagons. The slightest check at the head of the procession meant a stop to all the rest, and because each wagon took a fraction of time longer than the one ahead to see its predecessor started and to get under way itself, what to a wagon in the front ranks was no more than a slowing to avoid running into the wagon ahead was easily translated a few teams back into a pull-up and immediate move on, and further back the line to a longer and longer interval of halt. So that in the middle and rear of the line there were frequent halts of a minute, two, three, and up to ten minutes. And if a wagon driving through an extra soft portion of road was caught and held beyond the immediate strength of the tired team to pull out, the halt might spin out into anything up to fifteen minutes. Several times during the day there were hour-long halts at cross- or fork-roads, while cross streams of traffic

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passed clear or entering streams were shuffled in. Towards mid-day exasperated officers strove to avail themselves of the frequent halts to water and feed. Buckets would be unhooked from their places under the wagons, and the drivers, leaning out and scooping the water out from the ditches, would perhaps get so far in the watering performance when there would be a hurried order to "Get mounted," the buckets would be emptied, the drivers hurriedly remount and move on again—to halt again perhaps within a hundred yards. No officer dare halt or hold his section of the column to complete his watering and feeding because the orders were imperative to press on and avoid halting the whole. A halt to feed was actually made about 2 P.M. when it was plain that there was no hope of getting the column in, as had been intended, by the early afternoon; but the halt was so short that there could be no attempt to cook food or make a hot drink for the men. They ate cold bully beef and biscuit while the horses fed, and finished their meal in the saddle when the horses moved again.

During the afternoon it grew steadily colder, and the rain drizzled on without

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ceasing. The road ran parallel now with the firing line, and as the darkness fell the horizon was lit continually with rising and falling belts of light from the trench flares, while the guns flashed quick leaping and vanishing gusts of vivid light, rolled and grumbled and roared incessantly. The rattle and splutter of rifle fire swelled to what one might have thought an alarming nearness when the road twisted in towards the firing line, or a falling away of the ground or change in the wind allowed the sound to carry better, dropped away again to no more than a distant crackle as a belt of wood shut it off or the road ran wide out from the battle line.

But of all these things the men on the road were heedless. They were concerned only with the slowness of the journey, the wish for it to end, the approach of dark long before it could be completed. The column carried no lights, and as the night shut down the road under the horses' feet became almost invisible to the eyes of the drivers sitting on their horses or box seats. Each lead driver had to be content to follow close on the tracks of the wagon in front of him, to hold his tired horses up when they stumbled, to halt them quickly when the wagon ahead

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halted, to move them on again instantly on the other vehicle starting. Every man kept his eyes carefully away from the dancing lights on the horizon, because watching them for a few seconds meant a temporary total blindness and the vanishing of the road beneath them when they came to look down, and this driving in the dark was quite bad enough without that.

The inevitable happened at last. A team driven too close to the roadside brought its wagon wheels within a foot of the ditch, just at a part, unfortunately, where the road-edge sloped sharply to the steep side of the ditch. The "long-rein driver" perched on the box called a sharp word of warning and swung his wheelers to the left, felt the wagon beneath him skid sideways, lurch suddenly, sink sharply "by the stern" and halt abruptly. The driver of the next team saw what had happened, shouted to the other drivers behind him, wrenched his horses' heads clear of the bogged wagon and tried to pull up. But the horses, jerked from their sleepy plodding, swerved, plunged, slithered wildly on the wet road; the wagon wheels, gripped fast by the sharp thrust of the brake, failed to bite on the slippery surface, skidded forward,

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butted the wheelers heavily, slewed, slithered again and brought up with a splintering jar and a rear wheel fast locked in the wheel of the bogged wagon. The near wheeler of the second team, floundering and splashing and scrambling wildly for foothold, caught the bump of the wagon, fell, and slid wholesale into the ditch. The road was completely and effectually blocked.

Now the ditches in this part of Flanders are anything from about three to six feet deep, and their sides are cut down as straight and smooth as a wall; in winter they are full to the brim with ice-cold water, and their bottom is an unplumbed depth of mud of the consistency of molasses and the tenacity of fish glue. From all of which you will understand and appreciate the difficulty of rescuing the trapped wagon and horse, although you will never, unless you have experienced it, understand the wetness, the cold, the exasperating stupidity of the horse, the monumental bulk and weight and the passive resistance of a wet and mud-plastered wagon, the bitter unpleasantness of the whole job.

Actually, although this may appear surprising, the salving of the horse was a greater

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difficulty than the restoration of the wagon to the road. The wagon had to be unloaded it is true, but after that a plank pushed sloping down under the wheel, a swarm of men clustering and clutching on the wheels and tailing on a couple of drag-ropes, brought the concern out with a rush. Then the team was hooked in again and the wagon rolled off, and with a chorus of cries, of scuffling hoofs, of grinding wheels, the column halted behind the stalled wagons came to life and rumbled on their way. The horse made a longer and more temper-raising job. Driver Jim Rolf, of the A.S.C., had always had an inordinate pride in his wheelers, a liking for them that in connection with a human would have been called love, a belief in their intelligence that was beyond doubt. But that night his pride had a muddy fall, his love a cooling off into annoyance, his belief a staggering blow. "Golly," the ditched near-wheeler, displayed a stupidity that, as Driver Rolf assured her, would have disgraced "a mongrel mule," an indifference to helping herself, and a calm resignation and acceptance of her fate that respectively, and again in the words of Driver Rolf, "was more like a oyster than a 'orse" and "might

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do for a bloomin' padre, but wasn't no use in the A.S.C." Driver Rolf, at the first crash of catastrophe, had flung down off his perch and was round at his wheelers' heads in a flash, unhooking "Wog," lying quietly on his side in the road and waiting for assistance and instructions, and adjuring the struggling "Golly" to keep quiet an' not make a fool of herself. "Golly" took the advice so completely that, having quietened, she refused—although the mud clamped about her legs may have had something to do with it—to move a limb thereafter. At first Rolf and the other drivers called to assist tried to persuade her to get her fore-feet on the bank, then by passing a drag-rope round her fore-legs tried to pull them from under her and up on to firm ground. The only result was to upset her balance and set her slowly sinking sideways until her body was completely covered and only her neck and head were above water. It began to look as if the horse must drown in a four- or five-foot ditch.

Meantime the wagon was man-handled along and into the side of the road, and the stream of vehicles resumed their interrupted march, rumbling past a busy rescue party

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grouped at the ditch-side, working in the light of a couple of lanterns with picks and spades and drag-ropes, to extricate the sunken "Golly." At last a shelving cut was made in the bank of the ditch, and Driver Rolf, already three parts soaked with splashings and fumblings to fix a rope correctly about his horse, completed the job and the soaking by plunging boldly into the ditch and passing a couple of ropes under the mare's body. A string of men tailed on to the ropes, and at the word from an A.S.C. officer who had taken charge of the proceedings threw their weight into a regular tug-of-war heave, and hauled the animal out bodily on to the shelving bank, up it, and on to the road.

It was after ten o'clock before the wheelers were hooked in and the wagon swung into the traffic procession, with Driver Rolf, soaked and shivering on the box. In ten minutes he had to pull up again for another block somewhere in the darkness ahead. He climbed down and stamped to and fro for full thirty minutes. Then he went and rummaged out a couple of box-lids he had been saving in his wagon for firewood, and, always keeping a wary ear turned to the road for the sound of callings and crunching wheels that would

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tell him the transport was on the move again, jumped the ditch, hunted in the darkness of a patch of wood, and managed to collect a small armful of twigs and branches. He split his dry wood, built it up and lit it, his fingers so numbed and shaking that he could scarcely fumble out a match. Under the shelter of his cap—it was still drizzling fine rain—he managed to get a brisk flame going, and when he had it burning strong and bright piled his twigs and branches on it. The wood hissed and sputtered, but caught at last, and tongues of flame began to crackle up, throwing a cheerful radiance on the wet faces and forms of the men who quickly crowded round and a most grateful glow of life-giving warmth on Driver Rolf, crouched with chattering teeth and blue lips close over the blaze. But before the fire had even completely caught there came a distant shout, repeated along and down the line, "Get mounted—get mounted," and the sound, far off at first but rapidly coming nearer and nearer, of tramping hoof-beats, scrunching wheels, and the rumble of moving wagons. The men about the fire scattered and ran to their horses, and Rolf had no choice but to leave his precious fire and run with them.

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The procession started, wagon after wagon—and within two hundred yards halted again. The disgusted Rolf had the mortification of seeing his fire blazing up strongly and cheerfully and immediately surrounded by a fresh crowd of the nearest men. It was too far to go back, since the move might come again any minute, and anyhow Rolf guessed the difficulty he would have in forcing a way to the front of the dense ring about his own fire. He tried to wrap his wet coat closer about him, and sat huddled and shivering on his seat for another half-hour before the way was clear and the wagons crawled on again.

It was nearly midnight when he dragged wearily into camp. He took his horses' bits out, slacked their girths, gave them generous feeds, and when their nosebags were empty hung a net full of hay to the point of the wagon-pole, and then went to the cook-house, where he was given a mess-tin of soup and meat and a mug of hot tea. These things finished to the last bite and drop, he, by special and gracious favour of the cook took off his soaking boots and hung his wet jacket before the embers of the fire, sat himself beside it, and dropped instantly into deep sleep. This, be it noted, was the only

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sleep he had been able to have for some thirty-six hours. The night before the column marched he had been out with his wagon drawing rations from "Refilling Point," had been from 6 P.M. on the road, waiting his turn for loading, moving up a wagon's length at a time to the loading-place, where, under the light of a couple of lanterns, men were hacking up cheeses, dismembering sides of bacon, trundling out boxes of bully and biscuits and tins of tea and sugar. Driver Rolf had pulled out as soon as his wagon was loaded, waited for the others to complete their loading, moved on to rejoin his unit with them. Delays and checks on a road already, even at that early hour, astir with traffic, had prevented their reaching the camping-ground until about a couple of hours before the hour fixed to turn out on the march, and that brief time had been fully occupied by Rolf, first in watering and feeding and rubbing down his horses, and then in getting his own breakfast, packing his kit for the road, and harnessing up again.

Now, as may be imagined, he slept heavily, sitting huddled over the half-dead fire, on this his second night out of bed, after a day of wearying and strenuous work—and in

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case that be not properly understood it may be remarked that sitting on the hard wooden seat of a jolting wagon, bumping and jarring over a rough road, holding a pair of "heavy draught" horses and steering them with a constantly needed care, hauling them up every few minutes, all these things are actually tiring hard physical work.

But he only slept for half an hour. At the end of that time he was shaken roughly awake and told to get a move on, and to fall in outside the lines before hooking in his horses. He rose stiffly, sore in every joint and aching in every limb as if he had been beaten and bruised with a club. The fire was dead and he was chilled to the marrow with the cold that had struck in from his wet clothes, with the more miserable cold that comes out of late and insufficient sleep. He shook like a man in the ague, and his teeth chattered as he thrust his arms into the clammy dampness and coldness of his jacket's clinging sleeves. Putting on his boots was sheer torture. They were icy cold, and the wet leather was stiff and hard as a board. Altogether he was just about as miserable, cold, and uncomfortable as a man can be, as he hobbled stiffly from the cook-

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house into the bitter rawness of the winter morning. As he went out one of the cooks came in and commenced to make up the fire, and it suddenly struck Driver Rolf what a magnificent and enviable job a cook had, always messing about with a warm fire and hot water and other of the pleasantest things in life. The cook, roused from a warm straw bed in the cold of one o'clock to light a fire with damp wood, probably held a different opinion of the pleasures of his office. Rolf had three minutes with his horses before the "Fall in" was called. They wickered and nuzzled at him, each jealously pushing the other's head aside as he spoke to them and rubbed their noses and pulled their ears. "After all, Golly," he said, "a cook don't have horses; eh, Wog?" and at that thought the cook's job lost its savour and a gleam of content warmed the driver's soul.

A figure suddenly appeared in the shape of lamp-illumined breeches and boots and a blot of shadow above them, and his sergeant spoke briskly: "Hullo, Rolf! Merry Christmas!"

"Lumme!" said Driver Rolf. "If I hadn't clean forgot—same to you, sergeant."

"An' may we see the next at 'ome," said

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the sergeant. "Now what about this pair o' yours? Had a stiffish day yesterday, didn't they?"

Rolf told him briefly but pungently the sort of day they had had and the work they had done. He was so eloquent on their behalf—quite omitting any mention of his own sorrows—that the sergeant promised to manage it somehow that they'd get a light wagon-load that day and the other wagons share the balance.

Driver Rolf began to feel the world not so bad a place after all, and even the briefly outlined programme of the day's work to begin at once and keep on till evening did not cast him down. "They'll do it easy with a light load," he said cheerfully.

The "Fall in" was called, and wondering rather at this unusual item of the morning's work, the men fell in at the end of the horse lines, standing in an ankle-deep porridge of mud.

Their officer addressed them shortly, an N.C.O. beside him with a lantern, and another with a handful of envelopes and a bundle of cardboard boxes. The wagons, said the officer, would go to Refilling Point, load, march together from there and rejoin the

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Division at their new camp, separate there, and each take their rations to their own units. And because he might not see them together again that day he had paraded them then to wish them a happy Christmas and good luck, and to give them a little present that had been sent out to every man in the Expeditionary Force.

One by one the men received a photograph of the King and Queen with a message written on the back, and a brass tobacco-box containing tobacco and cigarettes and the Christmas wishes of Princess Mary.

"Bloomin' 'andsome," said one driver admiringly. "I'm goin' to send mine 'ome to be kep' for me. There'll be bags o' new troops out 'ere in the spring, but we'll allus 'ave these to show we was out wi' the first crush."

"My dad's got 'is Queen's chocolate box yet that she gave the first lot out in S'th Africa," said Driver Rolf. "I'll be upsides with 'im now."

"I been thinkin' this week past," said a third, "that I never knew anythin' less like Christmas comin'. It seems more like it now somehow."

And so "somehow" it did. One might

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hardly expect a handful of men, turned out in the raw cold small hours of a winter morning, standing in mud over their boots, with a long weary day's work and a bare half night's uncomfortable sleep behind them, and another wet and weary day ahead, to rise with any enthusiasm to a call for "Three cheers for the King and Queen." But they did it, the "H'ray" leaping eagerly and cheerfully close on the last sound of the word of the officer's "Hip-hip-hip——"

And Driver Rolf's was the first and loudest and longest cheer of the lot.

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II

IN REST

"ANYBODY awake?" said Second Lieutenant Smith in low tones, and in immediate reply there came a simultaneous "Yes" from two blanketed bundles lying along the wall on the stone floor of the farmhouse kitchen. Smith freed his shoulders of the blanket and rose on his elbow, but, struck at once by the chill dampness of the air, sank back and snuggled down luxuriously in the warm "flea-bag." "Isn't this gorgeous?" he exclaimed. "No need to get up, nothing special to do when we are up, and nothing to prevent us going to bed again as early as we like."

"Funny thing is," said Walker, another subaltern, "that when we have a chance like this to sleep as late as we like, we're all wide awake."

The Captain, the third man on the floor, laughed. "It was nothing but a few hens

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clucking that woke me," he said. "That's queer, too, when you remember how sound we sleep as a rule through the devil's own row the guns make."

"Of course," said Walker, with sudden understanding. "That's what seems so unnatural. I couldn't think what made everything so different. It's waking up and not hearing a sound of guns. How many months is it since we've done that?"

"August," said Smith reflectively. "September, October, November, and this is December—somewhere round four months, I suppose."

"Not much wonder we miss 'em," said the Captain and reached out a hand to the tunic spread over the foot of his blankets and fumbled a cigarette case out of the pocket. He lit a cigarette and wriggled the blankets up round his shoulders again. "Um-m-m," he murmured. "This is fine, isn't it?" and "Ripping," "Top-hole," agreed the others cordially.

There came a cautious knock at the door, and on the shouted command "Come in" one of the *batmen* looked in. "Just wanted to see if any of you were awake, sir," he said. "No need to disturb you if you wasn't." He

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vanished abruptly, but next minute returned bearing three steaming bowls.

"*Tea,*" said Smith, delightedly sniffing at the bowl set beside him on the floor. "Tea," chorused the other two. "Thanks." "Brilliant idea, Johnson."

"Don't tell me, Johnson, *don't* tell me there's fresh milk in it."

"There is, sir," said Johnson, with obvious pride in the announcement. "And there's fresh milk for breakfast. I got near a pint of it this mornin'."

"Fresh milk—and I heard hens clucking this morning. Johnson, I b'lieve you're going to tell me there'll be eggs for breakfast," said Walker.

"No, sir," said Johnson, regretfully. "Not this morning. But I might manage to get some in a day or two. Hens don't lay much in this weather, sir."

"And I don't blame the hens," put in the Captain. "Seems to me nothing but a duck or a fish gets any encouragement to carry on business in this country. Suppose it's still raining, Johnson? But it is. I can hear it."

"Personally," said Walker, "I don't care if it does rain. Makes it all the jollier knowing

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you haven't to go out in it and swim up a flooded trench to an Observation Station."

"It's only seven o'clock," said Smith, looking at his wrist watch. "I'm going to go to sleep again for an hour. Not that I want it, but just for the satisfaction of being able to do it."

"I'm going to lie awake and gloat over not having to get up," said the Captain. "It's too precious a feeling to waste in sleep."

"We'll have the same every morning for some weeks with any luck," said Walker.

"Tea in bed—fresh milk—a dry roof over us—a possibility of eggs—for days and days and days. If I'm dreaming it all, please don't waken me for a bit," pleaded Smith.

"Luxury—bloated, bulgin' luxury," murmured Walker.

At any other time and place "luxury" would have been about the last word to apply to the quarters they occupied. Three of them slept with nothing but a canvas valise and a blanket between them and the cold stone floor; their room was the stone and mud-walled living-room and kitchen of a farmhouse, with a tiny little stove about the size and shape of a porridge pot and a stove-pipe leading up into a yawning chimney.

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Down the chimney, through a gaping void under the ill-hung door, by cracks in the plank ceiling and crevices round the badly fitted window, damp and icy draughts came and went continually; in a corner of the room stood a stone sink, with an iron pump rising through the floor beside it and its long handle projecting into the room; the surplus water which, pumped vigorously, splashed out of the sink and down into a wide pool on the floor, meandered round and finally made an exit through a hole in the wall near the pump foot—a hole which also provided an entrance for another stream of cold wind; the furniture was of the roughest description, a heavy wooden table, a couple of chairs and a number of deal ration boxes for seats; the floor was fouled with clods of mud mixed with manure and dirty straw carried in by heavy-booted feet entering from the farmyard outside the door; and across the room from the one entrance door to another leading to a further room ran a wet and mud-tramped passage where the farm people, men and women, moved to and fro. A true description of the room would simply have been that it was a dirty, cold, damp, squalid, ill-furnished and utterly comfortless hovel. Yet the three

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men lying on the stone floor had no faintest intention of being sarcastic when they spoke of comfort or "luxury." After all, these terms are merely a matter of comparison, and the three were making their comparison with other dwelling places in trenches and dug-outs and with the shell-smashed billets they had inhabited for months past. Outside the door footsteps tramped and kicked energetically for a minute, the door flung open, and a rubber-booted, mackintoshed figure stamped in.

"Hullo, not up yet; and getting on for eight o'clock!" shouted the newcomer. "Rouse ye, rouse, my merry, merry men," he carolled at the pitch of his voice.

"Shut up, Blinker. Go'n see a doctor about it if it's bad enough to make you scream in agony like that," said Smith. "But don't come bawling in here disturbing people in the middle of the night."

"Selfish animal," said Walker, sitting up and hugging his knees. "Just because he has to get up for morning stables he can't let any one else enjoy five minutes' peaceful slumber. But just wait, my Blinker. My turn to be up to-morrow, and see how long I leave you to sleep."

"Your turn to-morrow, and Smiffums next

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day," said Blinker, joyfully. "Two whole mornings I lie in bed until eight o'clock," and again burst into song. "Oh let us be joyful, joyful, jo-oyful, jo-hoy-ful!" until his *batman* arrived with a pail of cold and a mugful of hot water. Blinker threw off his streaming mackintosh and tossed it into a corner, pulled off his "coat warm British" and clad in gum boots, breeches and vest, proceeded to shave. The other two emerged reluctantly from their blankets and began shiveringly to hurry into their clothes. Walker, stripped to the waist, was beginning to wash in a canvas bucket; Smith, in his pants and one sock, was negotiating the first leg of his breeches; when the door opened unceremoniously and a young woman walked in, and, taking no more notice of them than to drop a brief "*B'jour, messieurs,*" went to the corner and pumped up a pailful of water, lifted it and walked out.

"I say," ejaculated Walker faintly. "That's a bit—eh, what?"

"Ra-ther," said Smith, who had subsided hurriedly and endeavoured to hide his unclothed legs under the blanket.

"Bless you, my children, that's all right," said Blinker cheerfully. "They don't seem to mind it, so why should we?"

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"I dunno why," returned Smith. "But fact remains I do. Johnson, just lock that door till I get my breeches on at least. No lock? Well, stand with your back against the door a minute"; and while Johnson stood sentry he hastily pulled on some clothes. Blinker chuckled through his soap-suds. "You were too sound asleep to know it," he said, "but the whole blessed family, includin' grandmother, mother, and daughters ranging from thirty down to about thirteen-year-old, have been promenadin' to and fro through this blessed room since long before daybreak."

"Well, as you say, Blinker, if they don't mind, why should we?" said the Captain, and continued his washing.

While they finished dressing, the room was converted from a bedroom to a breakfast-room by the simple process of rolling up the blankets and the valises together against the wall, and laying the breakfast table with an old newspaper for tablecloth and cups and plates of enamelled iron.

The Major came along from another room, a cupboard-sized room he had secured as a sleeping place. Smiling and apparently well content with the world, he rubbed his hands and looked cheerfully round the dreary room.

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"'Morning all," he said in reply to their salutations. "Yes, I slept well—except that I kept waking all the morning and wondering what was the matter. Found it was the unearthly quiet that disturbed me—not hearing the guns rumbling, y'know."

"I noticed the same thing," said the Captain. "But what I notice more is the blessed relief of being away from the sound of shells going over the roof, and the chance of one coming through at any minute."

"Bit chilly in here, isn't it?" said the Major. "What about a fire?"

"No coal or wood to be had, sir," said the *batman* who was bringing in the breakfast. "People here are very hard up for any sort of fuel, sir, and can't spare any. They say they've hardly enough for their own cooking."

"We'll see to-day if the Quartermaster can't raise some," said the Captain.

"I found a big wash-tub the farm people have," said Blinker. "Just the thing for a bath. If we can find some fuel we can start a series of hot baths all round."

"Hot bath," said the Major gloatingly. "And get into slacks after it and sit over a blazing fire. Sounds pretty good."

"Some of us might ride into —— this after-

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noon, sir," said Smith, "and see if we can do some shopping. I have heard that it's possible to buy a bottle of whisky there."

"By all means," said the Major. "Try for some meat, too—we're still on a half ration of frozen meat, half bully beef, y'know—and any sort of fresh green vegetables would be a Godsend."

After breakfast they all dawdled in delightful laziness over a smoke, and then the subalterns went off to look round the lines. The Captain accompanied Blinker and they picked a way through the dirty farmyard, down a muddy lane, and into a field where the horses were tied in long lines. There was no picking a way over the field and through the horse lines. They simply had to plough through the ankle-deep mud into which the soft ground had already been churned. The horses stood dejectedly with drooped heads and with the driving rain running in rivulets off them, or moved restlessly, lipping over the wet ground in vain search for a blade of grass or a dropped grain of corn.

"They look pretty tucked up," said the Captain critically. "And this field will be knee deep in liquid mud in about a couple of days. I'm going to hunt round and see if I

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can't find some sort of cover to get them under."

The Sergeant Major joined them, but shook his head in answer to the Captain's suggestion. "No chance of cover for horses, I'm afraid, sir," he said. "As a matter of fact there's little enough cover for the men; and some of the barns they're in have been leaking so badly the men preferred to move out and put up any sort of bivouacs they could. You see where they've pitched them in the lee of the hedge there."

The Captain walked over with him to inspect the "bivvies." They were the flimsiest of shelters, built with waterproof groundsheets and bits of sacking spread over rough frameworks of branches and twigs. The Captain looked at them doubtfully.

"Poor sort of shelter," he commented, and spoke to a couple of the Gunners squatted inside one shack. "That's pretty mucky, isn't it, Potts? Aren't you better off in the barn? No, don't come out; stay where you are."

"We'd rather be 'ere, sir," said Potts, cheerfully. "It isn't too bad, an' it's a little drier an' a lot warmer than the barn. We was near froze last night. An' there's no rats 'ere. The barn's fair movin' wi' them."

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"I can't see that you're drier there," said the Captain, still very doubtfully. "At least you have dry ground under you in the barn."

"We got some twigs under us 'ere, sir," said the other man, hitching himself aside so that the Captain could see. "Our groundsheets is on the roof, but we 'ave our mackintoshes under us. An' sleepin' together with our two blankets over we're all *teek*."

The Captain fidgeted a little longer, but finally gave in and left the men in their "bivvies." The little affair, the manner of his judgment and the acceptance of it reminded one of nothing so much as a somewhat fussy mother giving her children permission to play some game where she feared they might get their feet wet. He carried on with the mothering performance for an hour longer: inspecting the men's barns and directing them how to attempt a stoppage of the roof leakages; holding an anxious conference with the Sergeant Major and Quartermaster Sergeant on the possibilities of rigging up a wagon cover to hold water, of the cooks heating up water to give the men baths in turn, of the provision of fuel for the fires; bargaining with the women of near-by cottages over the prices at which they would undertake to wash the men's

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underclothes; walking round the horses with the section officers and advising on treatment of galls, of this horse to be let off any work for a few days, of that one to get an extra handful of corn.

Then he left the lines and ploughed off through the mud back to the farmhouse billet, whistling softly and contentedly to himself over a good morning's work and the pleasurable results that should accrue to all concerned.

"Get those baths going first minute you can," had been his final word. "The men must want 'em pretty bad."

"They do so, sir," agreed the Sergeant Major. "And it's hard to say whether it's us or our clothes that want it worst. The battery's just fair lousy, sir, and that's the only word for it."

"Small wonder," said the Captain. "Well, get the baths going and give 'em all the washing they want as long as we're out on rest."

Arriving back at the billet he found a small but very cheerful wood fire crackling in the tiny stove.

"Hullo, Johnson, where did you manage to forage the wood?" he demanded, and

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Johnson explained glibly that it was just a little bit he had "picked up."

"Picked up," repeated the Captain suspiciously. "Not any of those big hop-poles out of the fields, I hope."

Johnson assured him that no hop-pole had been touched. "Though I admit, sir, it does seem 'ard seein' all them poles about, an' we mustn't take one, even a broke one, though we 'aven't a splinter of fire an' might be freezin' to death."

"Maybe," said the Captain. "But you heard the orders given to the troops about taking any wood, and especially about touching fences or hop-poles. And if the Officers' Mess breaks the rule the men can't be expected to keep it. So don't try coming the old soldier over it or there'll be trouble."

The door flung open with a bang and the three junior officers bundled in.

"Have you heard? . . . Isn't it great? . . . Couldn't believe it . . . true enough though. . . . What luck, what toppin' . . ." they rattled excitedly.

"Here, here, what's all the *tamasha?* Heard what? What luck? One at a time, please."

"*Leave,*" exploded Blinker.

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"Yes, leave . . . leave to England," chorused the other two, and between them showered fragments of excited explanation and comment on the listener, while Blinker chanted joyfully:

"Oh Indi-a-a's a beautiful land, bee-yewtiful land to view
Over the rail of the *Jumna's* stern, above the bumping screw,
While a Lascar hand on the fo'c's'l' head howls 'Hum deckty hai,'
An' we're out'ard bound for Blighty till our leaves roll by."

"Oh, shut up, Blinker," shouted the Captain. "What *are* you fellows gassing about? *Who's* going on leave? Who said anything about——"

"Let me tell him," said Blinker. "Lemme break the glad tidings. Listen, *mong capitaine* —we're all goin' on leave—all going in turn—the Division's goin'—forty-eight whole hours in England—forty-eight crowded hours of joyful life in blessed old Blighty. Two officers per Battery—the Adjutant just told us—that'll be you and the Major for first turn. . . . And, by the way, where's the Major?"

On inquiry it was found that the Major had gone to Headquarters billets a mile away,

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called by an orderly with an urgent message half an hour since.

"Of course," said Blinker. "Sent for to be told to bundle and go.

'An' we're out'ard bound for Blighty. . . .'

All right, all right. I won't sing if you don't like it."

"It's true enough, Skipper," said Smith. "Forty-eight hours' leave to England. You heard, of course, that some of the other Divisions started leaves a week or two ago."

"Heard all sorts of yarns about it," admitted the Captain. "But I thought it was on special application—'urgent private affairs' sort of thing."

"Not so, dear one," said Blinker. "All officers and so many N.C.O.'s and men through the Division. Oh, Lord, think of it! London for forty-eight hours! How many hot baths d'you suppose a man can get into forty-eight hours?"

"Does it mean forty-eight hours from the time we leave here, or from the time we land?" said the Captain, abandoning all further disbelief.

That started an argument, and for half an hour they wrangled and laughed and talked,

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and laid minute and exact plans and divisions of the leave hours, and discussed what theatres they would go to, and at what restaurants they would eat, what they would have for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

"Only thing that worries me," said Blinker, "is whether to spend the whole forty-eight hours in a beautiful soft bed with white sheets on it, or to stop awake the whole time and get every minute I can eating and drinking and bathing and taking every pretty girl I know out to teas and things. 'Tisn't long enough, y'know. We should have two forty-eight hour-zzez—one to sleep through, and one to enjoy."

"Hog," said Smith. "Never satisfied. Whoever heard of leaves home from a war before? You'll be wanting reg'lar week-ends home next."

"Here's the Major," said Blinker. "He'll tell us all about it. Pray Heaven it's a full forty-eight——"

But their chatter and their beaming smiles died away as the Major walked in and looked round them with a deadly serious face. "He hasn't heard," said Blinker, suddenly. "Great news, sir. The Adjutant just told us . . ."

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"I know," said the Major. "About home leaves. But that is off. I've just seen the General, and we're going into action again . . . at once. One or two batteries badly knocked out up there and we're wanted to lend a hand. We'll be attached to another Division for a few weeks."

There was silence for a minute. "Few weeks," said the Captain. "That means the Division's rest will be over—and we'll miss our turn, I suppose."

"I'm afraid so," said the Major slowly. "The General said it would probably mean that. I found all the other Battery Commanders with him when I got there. He only wanted one Battery, and left it to us to volunteer or draw lots. As we're the senior Battery I had first choice . . . and I volunteered." He glanced round the four faces and waited a moment to give them the chance to speak, or—what would be equally significant—be silent.

The Captain backed him swiftly, as a good second-in-command knowing a good commander should. "Of course," he said, "after all, we *are* the senior Battery."

And the others without even waiting for him to finish speaking echoed his "Of course"

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emphatically. "Glad you didn't toss for it, sir," said Blinker sturdily. "Awful chowse it would have been if one of the others had snapped the job from under our noses."

"I might have tossed," said the Major quietly, but with a prideful glint in his eye, "if I hadn't thought you'd all have felt the same about it as myself."

That afternoon the Battery moved out from its camp and rumbled and squelched down the muddy lane on to the muddy main road. At the turn, mired already to its middle and muffled to its wet ears, it waited a minute for a crawling convoy to move clear, and the gunners of one of the other batteries camped there moved to the roadside and offered sympathy and frank commiseration. "Missin' your turn of leave too," said one. "Perishin' 'ard luck that is."

The driver he addressed screwed sideways in his saddle and spoke loftily: "Leaves! There might be leaves again any time. But it isn't every day there's a chance to get an extry bar to our medals that not another Battery in the Division 'll 'ave. We thought o' that, y'see——" (he raised his voice to a nicely clear carrying pitch) "We thought o' that, when *we* volunteered for the job."

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III

THE GOOD WORD

It is quite inadequate to say that the troops were worn out, and indeed it is hard to find words to convey to any one who has not experienced some days of a mixture of fighting and forced marching how utterly exhausted, how dead beat, how stupefied and numbed in mind and body the men were. For four days and nights they had fought and dug trenches and marched, and fought again, and halted to dig again, and fought again, and extricated themselves under hailing bullets and pouring shells from positions they never expected to leave alive, only to scramble together into some sort of ragged-shaped units and march again. And all this was under a fierce August sun, with irregular meals and sometimes no meals, at odd times with a scarcity or complete want of water, at all times with a burning lack and want of sleep.

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This want of sleep was the worst of it all. Any sort of fighting is heavy sleep inducing; when it is prolonged for days and nights without one good full, satisfying sleep, the desire for rest becomes a craving, an all-absorbing, aching passion. At first a man wants a bed or space to lie down and stretch his limbs and pillow his head and sink into dreamless oblivion; at last he would give his last possession to be allowed merely to lean against a wall, to stand upright on his feet and close his eyes. To keep awake is torture, to lift and move each foot is a desperate effort, to keep the burning eyes open and seeing an agony. It takes the most tremendous effort of will to contemplate another five minutes of wakefulness, another hundred yards to be covered; and here were hours, endless hours, of wakefulness, miles and tens of miles to be covered.

Cruelly hard as the conditions were for the whole retreating army, the rearguard suffered the worst by a good deal. They were under the constant threat of attack, were halted every now and then under that threat or to allow the main body to keep a sufficient distance, had to make some attempt to dig in again, had to endure spasmodic shelling

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either in their shallow trenches or as they marched along the road.

By the fourth day the men were reduced to the condition of automatons. They marched —no, it could hardly be said any longer that they "marched"; they stumbled and staggered along like drunken men; their chins were sunk on their chests, their jaws hung slack, their eyes were set in a fixed and glassy stare, or blinked, and shut and opened heavily, slowly, and drowsily, their feet trailed draggingly, their knees sagged under them. When the word passed to halt, the front ranks took a minute or two to realise its meaning and obey, and the ranks behind bumped into them and raised heads and vacant, staring eyes for a moment and let them drop again in a stupor of apathy. The change, the cessation of automatic motion was too much for many men; once halted they could no longer keep their feet, and dropped and sat or rolled helplessly to lie in the dust of the road. These men who fell were almost impossible to rouse. They sank into sleep that was almost a swoon, and no shaking or calling or cursing could rouse them or get them up again. The officers, knowing this, tried to keep them from sitting or lying down, moved

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staggering themselves as they walked, to and fro along the line, exhorting, begging, beseeching, or scolding and swearing and ordering the men to keep up, to stand, to be ready to move on. And when the order was given again, the pathetically ridiculous order to "Quick march," the front ranks slowly roused and shuffled off, and the rear stirred slowly and with an effort heaved their rifles over their shoulders again and reeled after the leaders.

Scores of the men had abandoned packs and haversacks, all of them had cast away their overcoats. Many had taken their boots off and marched with rags or puttees wound round their blistered and swollen feet. But no matter what one or other or all had thrown away, there was no man without his rifle, his full ammunition pouches, and his bayonet. These things weighed murderously, cut deep and agonisingly into the shoulders, cramped arms and fingers to an aching numbness; but every man clung to them, had never a thought of throwing them into the ditch, although many of them had many thoughts of throwing themselves there.

Many fell out—fell out in the literal as well as the drill sense of the word; swerved to the

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side of the road and missed foot in the ditch and fell there, or stumbled in the ranks, tripped, lacking the brain or body quickness to recover themselves, collapsed, and rolled and lay helpless. Others, again, gasped a word or two to a comrade or an N.C.O., stumbled out of the ranks to the roadside, sank down with hanging head and rounded shoulders to a sitting position. Few or none of these men deliberately lay down. They sat till the regiment had plodded his trailing length past, tried to stagger to knees and feet, succeeded, and stood swaying a moment, and then lurched off after the rear ranks; or failed, stared stupidly after them, collapsed again slowly and completely. All these were left to lie where they fell. It was useless to urge them to move, because every officer and N.C.O. knew that no man gave up while he had an ounce of strength or energy left to carry on, that orders or entreaties had less power to keep a man moving than his own dogged pluck and will, that when these failed to keep a man going nothing else could succeed.

All were not, of course, so hopelessly done as this. There were still a number of the tougher muscled, the firmer willed, who kept their limbs moving with conscious volition,

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who still retained some thinking power, who even at times exchanged a few words or a mouthful of curses. These, and the officers, kept the whole together, kept them moving by force of example, set the pace for them and gave them the direction. Most of them were in the leading ranks of their own companies, merely because their greater energy had carried them there past and through the ranks of those whose minds were nearly or quite a blank, whose bodies were more completely exhausted, whose will-power was reduced to a blind and sheep-like instinct to follow a leader, move when and where the dimly seen khaki form or tramping boots in front of them moved, stop when and where they stopped.

The roads by which the army was retreating were cumbered and in places choked and blocked with fugitive peasantry fleeing from the advancing Germans, spurred into and upon their flight by the tales that reached them of ravished Belgium, by first-hand accounts of the murder of old men and women and children, of rape and violation and pillage and burning. Their slow, crawling procession checked and hindered the army transport, added to the trials of the weary troops by making necessary frequent halts and deviations

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off the road and back to it to clear some block in the traffic where a cart had broken down, or where worn-out women with hollow cheeks and staring eyes, and children with dusty, tear-streaked faces crowded and filled the road.

The rearguard passed numbers of these lying utterly exhausted by the roadside, and the road for miles was strewn with the wreckage of the retreat, with men who had fallen out unable longer to march on blistered or bleeding feet or collapsed in the heedless sleep of complete exhaustion; with broken-down carts dragged clear into the roadside and spilled with their jumbled contents into the ditch; with crippled horses and footsore cattle; with quivering-lipped, grey-haired old men, and dry-eyed, cowering women, and frightened, clinging children. Some of these peasantry roused themselves as the last of the rearguard regiments came up with them, struggled again to follow on the road, or dragged themselves clear of it and sought refuge and hiding in abandoned cottages or barns or the deep dry ditches.

At one point where the road crept up the long slope of a hill the rearguard came under the long-range fire of the German guns. The

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shells came roaring down, to burst in clouds of belching black smoke in the fields to either side of the road, or to explode with a sharp tearing cr-r-rash in the air, their splinters and bullets raining down out of the thick white woolly smoke-cloud that coiled and writhed and unfolded in slow, heavy, oily eddies.

One battalion of the rearguard was halted at the foot of the hill and spread out off the road and across the line of it. Again they were told not to lie down, and for the most part the men obeyed, leaning heavily with their arms folded on the muzzles of their rifles or watching the regiments crawling slowly up the road with the coal-black shell-bursts in the fields about them or the white air-bursts of the shrapnel above them.

"Pretty bloomin' sight—I don't think," growled a gaunt and weary-eyed private. The man next him laughed shortly. "Pretty one for the Germs, anyway," he said; "and one they're seein' a sight too often for my fancy. They'll be forgettin' wot our faces look like if we keep on at this everlastin' runnin' away."

"Blast 'em," said the first speaker savagely, "but our turn will come presently. D'you

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think this yarn is right, Jacko, that we're retirin' this way just to draw 'em away from their base? "

"Gawd knows," said Jacko; "but they didn't bring us over 'ere to do nothin' but run away, an' you can bet on that, Peter."

An order passed down the line, and the men began to move slowly into the road again and to shake into some sort of formation on it, and then to plod off up the hill in the wake of the rest. The shells were still plastering the hillside and crashing over the road, and several men were hit as the battalion tramped wearily up the hill. Even the shells failed to rouse most of the men from their apathy and weariness, but those it did stir it roused mainly to angry resentment or sullen oath-mumblings and curses.

"Well, Jacko," said Peter, bitterly, "I've knowed I had a fair chance o' bein' shot, but burn me if ever I thought I was goin' to be shot in the back."

"It's a long way to Tipperary," said Jacko, "an' there's bound to be a turnin' in it somewheres."

"An' it's a longer way to Berlin if we keeps on marchin' like this with our backs to it," grumbled Peter.

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The sound of another approaching shell rose from a faint moan to a loud shriek, to a roar, to a wild torrent of yelling, whooping, rush-of-an-express-train, whirlwind noise; and then, just when it seemed to each man that the shell was about to fall directly on his own individual head, it burst with a harsh crash over them, and a storm of bullets and fragments whistled and hummed down, hitting the fields' soft ground with deep *whutts*, clashing sharply on the harder road. A young officer jerked out a cry, stumbled blindly forward a few paces with outstretched arms, pitched, and fell heavily on his face. He was close to where Peter and Jacko marched, and the two shambled hastily together to where he lay, lifted and turned him over. Neither needed a second look. "Done in," said Peter briefly, and "Never knew wot hit 'im," agreed Jacko.

An officer ran back to them, followed slowly and heavily by another. There was no question as to what should be done with the lad's body. He had to be left there, and the utmost they could do for him was to lift and carry him—four dog-tired men hardly able to lift their feet and carry their own bodies—to a cottage by the roadside, and bring him

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into an empty room with a litter of clothes and papers spilled about the floor from the tumbled drawers, and lay him on a dishevelled bed and spread a crumpled sheet over him.

"Let's hope they'll bury him decently," said one of the officers. The other was pocketing the watch and few pitiful trinkets he had taken from the lad's pockets. "Hope so," he said dully. "Not that it matter much to poor old Dicky. Come on, we must move, or I'll never be able to catch the others up."

They left the empty house quietly, pulling the door gently shut behind them.

"Pore little Blinker," said Jacko as they trudged up the road after the battalion; "the best bloomin' officer the platoon ever 'ad."

"The best I ever 'ad in all my seven," said Peter. "I ain't forgettin' the way 'e stood up afore the C.O. at Aldershot when I was carpeted for drunk. And 'im tryin' to stand wi' the right side of 'is face turned away from the light, so the C.O. wouldn't spot the black eye I gave 'im in that same drunk!"

"Ah, an' that was just like 'im," said Jacko. "An' to think 'e's washed out with a 'ole in the back of his 'ead—the back of it, mind you."

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Peter cursed sourly.

The battalion trailed wearily on until noon, halted then, and for the greater part flung themselves down and slept on the roadside for the two hours they waited there; were roused—as many of them, that is, as would rouse, for many, having stopped the machine-like motion of marching, could not recommence it, and had to be left there—and plodded on again through the baking afternoon heat. They had marched over thirty miles that day when at last they trailed into a small town where they were told they were to be billeted for the night. Other troops, almost as worn as themselves, were to take over the duties of rearguard next day, but although that was good enough news it was nothing to the fact that to-night, now, the battalion was to halt and lie down and take their fill—if the Huns let them—of sleep.

They were halted in the main square and waited there for what seemed to the tired men an interminable time

"Findin' billets," said Jacko. "Wish they'd hurry up about it."

"Seems to me there's something more than billets in the wind," said Peter suspiciously. "Wot's all the officers confabbin' about, an'

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wot's that *tamasha* over there wi' them Staff Officers an' the C.O.?"

The *tamasha* broke up, and the C.O. tramped back to the group of his officers, and after a short parley they saluted him and walked over to the battalion.

"Fall in," came the order sharply. "Fall in there, fall in."

Most of the men were sitting along the curb of the pavement or in the dusty road, or standing leaning on their rifles. They rose and moved heavily and stiffly, and shuffled into line.

"Wot is it, sergeant?" asked Jacko suspiciously. "Wot's the move?"

"We're goin' back," said the sergeant. "Hurry up there, you. Fall in. We're goin' back, an' there's some word of a fight."

The word flew round the ranks. "Going back . . . a fight . . . back . . ."

Across the square another regiment tramped stolidly and turned down a side street. A man in their rear ranks turned and waved a hand to the waiting battalion. "So long, chums," he called. "See you in Berlin."

"Ga' strewth," said Jacko, and drew a deep breath. "Goin' back; an' a fight; an'

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the ol' Buffs on the move too. In Berlin, eh; wonder wot they've 'eard. Back—blimey, Peter, I believe we're goin' for the blinkin' 'Uns again. I believe we're goin' to advance."

That word went round even faster than the other, and where it passed it left behind it a stir of excitement, a straightening of rounded shoulders, a lifting of lolling heads. "Going back . . . going to attack this time . . . going to advance. . . ."

Actually this was untrue, or partly so at least. They were going back, but still merely acting as rearguard to take up a position clear of the town and hold it against the threat of too close-pressing pursuit. But the men knew nothing of that at the time. They were going back; there was word of a fight; what else did that spell but a finish to this cursed running away, an advance instead of a retreat? The rumour acted like strong wine to the men. They moved to the parade orders with something of their old drilled and disciplined appearance; they swung off in their fours with shuffling steps, it is true, but with a decent attempt to keep the step, with their heads more or less erect and their shoulders back. And when the head of the

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column turned off the square back into the same street they had come up into the town, a buzz of talk and calling ran through the ranks, a voice piped up shakily "It's a long way to Tipperary," and a dozen, a score, a hundred voices took up the chorus sturdily and defiantly. The battalion moved out with the narrow streets ringing to their steady tramp, tramp, over the *pavé* cobbles and the sound of their singing. Once clear of the town, it is true, the singing died away and the regular tramping march tailed off into the murmuring shuffle of feet moving out of step. But the deadly apathy had lifted from the men, there was an air of new life about them; one would never have known this battalion for the one that had marched in over the same road half an hour before. Then they were no more than a broken, dispirited crowd, their minds dazed, their bodies numbed with fatigue, moving mechanically, dully, apathetically, still plodding and shuffling their feet forward merely because their conscious minds had set their limbs the task, and then the tired brains, run down, had left the machinery of their bodies still working—working jerkily and slackly perhaps, but nevertheless working as it would continue to work

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until the overstrained muscles refused their mechanical duty.

Now they were a battalion, a knitted and coherent body of fighting men, still worn out and fatigued almost to the point of collapse, but with working minds, with a conscious thought in their brains, with discipline locking their ranks again, with the prospect of a fight ahead, with the hope strong in them that the tide was turning, that they were done with the running away and retreating and abandoning hard-fought fields they were positive they had won; that now their turn was come, that here they were commencing and making the longed-for advance.

And as they marched they heard behind them a deep *boo-boom, boo-boom, boo-boom* and the whistling rush of the shells over their heads. That and the low muttering rumble of guns far out on the flank brought to them a final touch of satisfaction. They were advancing, and the guns were supporting them already then—good, oh good!

And as they marched back down the road they had come they met some of their stragglers hobbling painfully on bandaged feet, or picked them up from where they still lay in a stupor of sleep on the roadside. And

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to all of them the one word "advance" was enough. "We're going back . . . it's an advance," turned them staggering round to limp back in the tail of the battalion, or lifted them to their feet to follow on as best they might. They picked up more than their own men, too, men of other regiments who had straggled and fallen out, but now drew fresh store of strength from the cheerful word "advance," and would not be denied their chance to be in the van of it, but tailed on in rear of the battalion and struggled to keep up with them. "We're all right, sir," said one when an officer would have turned him and sent him back to find his own battalion. "We're pretty near done in on marching; but there's a plenty fight left in us—specially when it's an advance."

"Jacko," said Peter, "I'm damn near dead; but thank the Lord I won't 'ave to die runnin' away."

"All I asks," said Jacko, "is as fair a target on 'em as we've 'ad before, an' a chance to put a 'ole in the back o' some o' *their* 'eads."

"Ah!" said Peter. "Pore little Blinker. They've got to pay for 'im an' a few more like 'im."

"They 'ave, blarst them," said Jacko

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savagely, and dropped his hand to his bayonet haft, slid the steel half out and home again. "Don't fret, chum, they'll pay—soon or late, this time or nex', one day or another—they'll pay."

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IV

FIGHTING STRENGTH

THE fighting strength of the three batteries of a Brigade of Field Artillery, at the time of the First Expeditionaries, totalled 18 guns, 18 officers, and about 650 non-commissioned officers and men. You might remember those figures, or when you have finished the reading of this tale just refer back to them.

The Brigade was posted before the action opened in a cornfield which lay on the banks of a canal, and the guns were "concealed" behind some of the innocent-looking stooks of cut corn which were ranged in rows along the field. It was the Brigade's first action, and every officer and man waited with expectant eagerness for the appearance of the enemy. On the other side of the canal there was a wide stretch of open ground, but to the gunners it appeared too good to be true that the enemy would advance across that open and give the guns a chance of sweeping them

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off the earth with shrapnel. At some points tongues and spurs of thick wood ran out towards the canal, and it was rather through and under cover of the trees that the artillerymen expected the enemy to try to press in on the front which ran roughly along the line of the canal. Such an advance would not give the guns so visible and open a target for so long a time; but, on the other hand, there was still an open space between the nearest parts of the woods and the canal bank, and if the attack were confined to the approaches through the woods it meant that the guns could concentrate on a much narrower front, and there was never a gunner of them there but believed his own battery alone, much less the whole Brigade, capable of smashing up any attempt to debouch from the woods and of obliterating any force that tried it. Nevertheless, all their training and teaching and manœuvres and field-days of peace times indicated the woods as the likeliest points of attack, because it had been an accepted rule laid down in peace—and there were plenty of men in the batteries who remembered the same and very much sterner rule laid down in the South African War—that infantry could not, across the open, attack

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entrenched positions held by infantry and covered by artillery.

On the whole, the Brigade were very well satisfied with the look of things, and having taken careful ranges to the different points of the probable targets, with special attention to the wood edges, uncapped a goodly number of fuses, given a last look to the mechanism of guns and gear, put some finishing touches to the cunning arrangement of corn shocks, they lit pipes and cigarettes and settled down comfortably to wait developments.

The developments came rapidly, but being at first more or less after the expected routine as laid down in their teaching, the Brigade were not unduly disturbed. The first fire of the enemy artillery was, as far as the Brigade could see, not particularly well aimed, and although it made a great deal of noise and smoke appeared to be doing little harm to the infantry trenches, and none to the artillery behind them. Presently the men watched with great interest, but little realisation of its significance, a grey dove-winged shape that droned up out of the distance across the line, swung round and began a careful patrol along its length. But after that the shells commenced to find the infantry

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trenches with great accuracy, and to pour a tremendous fire upon them. The Brigade listened and watched frowningly at first, and with growing anger and fidgetings, the screaming and crashing of the German shells, the black and white clouds of smoke that sprang so quickly up and down the infantry lines before them. They were at last given orders to fire, and although at first they were firing at an invisible target, the gunners brisked up and went about their business with great cheerfulness. All along the line the other British batteries were opening with a most heartening uproar that for the time filled the ear and gave the impression that our guns were dominating the situation. That, unfortunately, did not last long. The German rate and weight of fire increased rapidly, until it reached the most awe-inspiring proportions, and it began to look as if the British infantry were to be smothered by shell-fire, were to be blown piecemeal out of their scanty trenches, without being given a chance to hit back.

The Artillery Brigade whose particular fortunes we are following had, up to now, escaped quite lightly with nothing more than a few slight casualties from chance splinters

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of high-explosive shells that had burst some distance from them.

But suddenly the gunners were aware of a strange and terrifying sound rising above the thunder-claps of their own guns, the diminishing whinny of their own departing shells, the long roll of gun-fire on their flanks, the sharp tearing crashes of the enemy shell-bursts—a sound that grew louder and louder, rose from the hissing rush of a fast-running river to a fiercer, harsher note, a screaming vibrating roar that seemed to fill the earth and air and sky, that drowned the senses and held the men staring in amazement and anticipation of they knew not what. Then when the wild whirlwind of sound had reached a pitch beyond which it seemed impossible for it to rise, it broke in a terrific rolling c-r-r-r-ash that set the solid earth rocking. One battery was hidden from the other two by a writhing pall of thick black smoke, out of which whirled clods of earth, stones, and a flying cloud of yellow straw. When the smoke dissolved, and the dust and straw and chaff had settled, the other two batteries could see a gun of the third overturned, the gunners rolling or limping or lying still about it, an odd man here and there staggering

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from the other guns—but all the rest of the gunners in their proper and appointed places, the five remaining guns firing one by one in turn as regularly as if on a peace practice. The Brigade had been introduced to something quite new to it, and that it certainly never expected to meet in open field of battle —a high-explosive shell from one of the heaviest German pieces. But unexpected as it was, more terrible than the gunners had ever imagined, there was no time now to think about such things. The German infantry attack was advancing under cover of their artillery, a crackling roll of rifle-fire was breaking out from the infantry trenches, sharp orders were shouting along the lines of guns. There was a pause while fuses were set to new times, while fresh aim was taken and new ranges were adjusted.

"Target, infantry advancin' — open sights . . . !" said one of the gun-layers in repetition of his orders. "But where's the bloomin' infantry to get my open sights on?"

"Where?" shouted his Number One, and pointed over the layer's shoulder as he stood up to look over the gun shield for a wider view. "Can't you see 'em there? 'Ave you gone blind?"

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"*That?*" said the layer, staring hard. "Is that infantry?" He had been looking for the scattered dots of advancing men that were all his experience had told him to see of an advancing line. He was quite unprepared for the solid grey mass that he actually did see.

"That's infantry," snapped his sergeant. "Did you think it was airyplanes? Get to it now."

The layer got to it, and in a few seconds the whole of the Brigade was pouring shells on the advancing mass as fast as the guns could be served. The Battery commanders had a vague idea that the enemy infantry had made some terrible mistake, had in error exposed themselves in mass in the open. When the guns had brought swift retribution for the mistake the mass would vanish; but meantime here was the guns' opportunity—opportunity such as no gunner there had ever hoped to have. But when the mass persisted and pushed on in the teeth of the fire that every one knew must be murderous beyond words, the rate of gun-fire was slowed down, and the batteries set themselves deliberately to wipe this audacious infantry out of existence.

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But then suddenly it began to look as if it were to be the Brigade that would be wiped out. A number of German guns turned on it, battered it with heavy high-explosive, lashed it with shrapnel, rent and tore and disrupted it with a torrent of light and heavy shells, a scorching whirlwind of fire, with blasts of leaping flame, with storms of splinters and bullets. One after another guns of the Brigade were put out of action, with guns destroyed or overthrown, with ammunition wagons blown up, with gun detachments killed or wounded. Gun by gun the fighting strength of the Brigade waned; but as each gun went the others increased their rate of fire, strove to maintain the weight of shells that a Brigade should throw. The guns that were destroying them were themselves invisible. To the Brigade there was no movement of men, no tell-tale groups, no betraying flash even, to show where their destroyers were in action. It is true that the Brigade spent no time looking for them, would not have spent a round on them if it had seen them. Its particular job had been plainly indicated to it—to stop the advancing infantry—and it had no time or shells to spare for anything else.

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But grimly and stoically though they took their punishment, gamely and desperately though they strove to fulfil their task, it was beyond them. The grey mass was checked and even stopped at times, but it came on again, and at the guns the ranges shortened and shortened, to a thousand yards, to eight, seven, six hundred. After that it was a hopeless fight, so far as this Brigade was concerned. Most of their guns were out of action, their ammunition was nearly all expended, they were under a rifle fire that scourged the guns with whips of steel and lead, that cut down any man who moved from the shelter of his gun's shield. Such guns as were left, such men as could move, continued to fire as best they might at ranges that kept getting still shorter and shorter. No teams could bring up ammunition wagons, so the rounds were carried up by hand across the bullet-swept field, until there were no more rounds to bring.

Since they were useless there, an attempt was made to bring the guns out of action and back under cover. It failed when, after a minute or two, half the remaining men had been cut down by bullets, and the commanders saw that nothing could move and

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live in the open. Then the order was passed to leave the guns and retire the men as best they could. That was at high noon, and for the next two or three hours the gunners tried in ones and twos to run the gauntlet of the fire and get back to cover. Some tried to crawl or to lie prone and wriggle out on their bellies; others stripped off bandoliers and haversacks and water-bottles, some even their jackets and boots to "get set" like runners in a hundred-yard dash, crouching in the shelter of the gun shield, leaping out and away in a desperate rush. But crawl or wriggle or run made little odds. Some men went half the distance to safety, a few went three-quarters, one or two to within bare paces of cover; but none escaped, and most went down before they were well clear of the gun. The few that from the first refused sullenly to abandon their guns, that swore amongst themselves to stick it out till dark if necessary and then drag the crippled guns away, came off best in the end because they lay and crouched under the scanty cover the guns gave, and watched the others go out to their deaths. They lay there through the long dragging hours of the afternoon with the bullets hissing and whistling over and past

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them, with the shells still crumping and crashing down at intervals, with the gun shields and wheels and steel wagon covers ringing and smacking to the impact of bullet and splinter, with one man here and another there jerking convulsively to a fresh wound—his first or his twenty-first as the case might be—groaning or cursing through set teeth, writhing in pain, or lying silent and still with all pain past.

Late in the afternoon there came a lull in the firing and a lessening of the bullet storm, and the order—a very imperative order—was passed for every man who could move to retire from the guns. So the few whole men came away, helping the wounded out as best they could; and even then they would not come empty-handed, and since they could not bring their guns, and they knew it was a retirement from the position, they stayed to collect the gun-fittings, crawling about amongst the disabled pieces and shattered carriages, with the bullets still hissing and snapping about their ears, throwing dust spurts among their feet, whisking and swishing through the scattered corn stooks. They brought away the sights and breech mechanisms and sight and field-clinometers, and every other fitment

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they could carry and thought worth having (and in that they were even wiser than they knew, for in those days such things as dial-sights were precious beyond words, and once lost could scarcely be replaced). And laden down under the weight and unhandiness of these things—the breech fittings alone weigh some forty pounds, and make a most unpleasantly awkward thing to carry—the handful of men left in each battery doubled laboriously out across the field and into comparative safety. At the cost of persistent attempts and some more men a gun was also man-handled out.

The battery that had salvaged its gun brought it safely through the Retreat which followed the action. The other batteries had to be content to keep their pitifully scant ranks together and stagger wearily over the long miles of the great Retreat lugging their cumbersome breech-blocks and dial-sights and gun gear with them. They clung at least to these as the outward and visible sign of being Gunners and the remains of Batteries, and they marched and hung together, waiting eagerly and hopefully for the day that would bring new guns to them and reserves to "make up the strength."

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An unknown General passed them one day where they were halted by the roadside for what one of the gunners facetiously called "inspection of gun-park an' stores." And "just see all the batteries' guns is in line an' properly dressed by the right," he added, with a glance at the one gun left to them.

"What — er — lot is this?" asked the General of the officer who was "inspecting."

"The Umpty-Noughth Brigade, Field Artillery, sir," said the officer; "Umptieth, Oughtieth, and Iddyieth Batteries." (It may have sounded pathetically ridiculous, but it was no more nor less than the bare truth; for it was as units and batteries that these remnants had marched and hung close together, and, given new guns and fresh drafts, they would be batteries and units again. After all, it is the spirit of and as a unit that counts.)

The General looked at the drawn-up ranks of the batteries, the gun detachments represented by two or three men, or by one man, or by an empty gap in the line; he saw the men grey with dust, with torn clothing, with handkerchiefs knotted at the corners replacing lost caps, with puttees and rags wound round blistered feet—but with shoulders set back,

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with heads held up and steady eyes looking unwinking to their front. He looked, too, at the one gun, scarred and dented and pitted and pocked with splinter marks and bullet holes, at each little pile of breech-blocks and sights and fittings that lay spread out on handkerchiefs and haversacks and rags in the place of the other guns; and he noticed that dirty and dusty and dishevelled as the men might be, the gun parts were speckless and dustless, clean and shining with oil.

The General spoke a few curt but very kindly words to the officer quite loud enough for "the Brigade" to hear, saying he remembered hearing some word of their cutting up and the fine finish they had made to their fight, congratulating them on the spirit that had held them together, wishing them luck, and hoping they would have their new guns before the time came to turn and hit back and begin the advance.

"I hope so, sir," said the officer simply; "and thank you."

The General saluted gravely and turned to go, but halted a moment to ask a last question. "How many of you—how many of the Brigade came out of that show?" he said.

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"Only what you see here, sir—one gun, one officer, and fifty-three men," said the officer.

You may remember what was the full fighting strength of a Field Artillery Brigade; but you must also remember that there is another sort of "fighting strength," greater far than mere numbers, the sort of strength that this poor shattered remnant of a Brigade still held undiminished and unabated—the stoutness of heart, the courage, the spirit that made the old "Contemptible Little Army" what it was.

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V

THE REARGUARD

ALL day long Papa Laval had been wandering about the streets of the little town, listening restlessly to the distant thunder of the guns, questioning the first of the fugitive peasantry who came streaming through in their flight towards safety. Papa Laval, with his one arm and his cripple leg and his tales of '70–'71, was naturally an authority on matters of war, and his fellow-townsmen listened deferentially to all he had to say about affairs. Papa was scornful of the first tales the fugitives told of a German victory and an Allies' retreat; but the first rumble of heavy transport wagons through the cobbled streets in the middle of the night brought him quickly from his bed and down the narrow stairs to find out what it meant. He could learn nothing much because the transport drivers were English, could only take some comfort from the calm with which

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they steered through the crowded street, laughed and called jokes which none understood down to the staring townsfolk. But Papa had seen too much of war not to understand the meaning of the swelling tide of transport, to mark as the light grew the jaded horses and the sleep-worn looks of the drivers. His dismay grew when the khaki regiments began to flood through after the toiling transport, while out behind them the growling thunder of the guns rolled louder and louder.

And by noon he was in utter despair. The street through the town was by then choked from end to end with a seething mass of men and cattle and vehicles, military transport and ammunition wagons, soldiers, old peasant men and boys, women with children clutching their skirts or wailing in their arms, country carts piled with bedding and furniture, squealing pigs and squawking leg-tethered poultry, with huddled clinging old crones and round-eyed infants. And when Papa was told that the road was blocked in the same way for miles back, that the Germans were coming fast, that the whole army was retiring as fast as it could, he groaned in despair. He watched the slow torrent struggling and scrambling

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along the choked street, the impatience of the officers and dull apathy of the men in the marching regiments as they progressed a few yards and halted for the head of the column to clear a way; and he pictured to himself visions of a squadron of Uhlans swooping down on the crowded road back there and the havoc they would make in the packed masses under their lances.

About noon he found a new interest and fresh food for thought. A regiment arrived, and, instead of pushing on through the town as the others had done, sought billets there and halted. Six men were billeted on Papa Laval, and between the smattering of broken French that one of them spoke and Papa's equally broken English it was possible to hold some conversation and glean some understanding of the recent battle. But the men were too worn out, too dead beat, too utterly fatigued to talk much. They ate and drank and then flung themselves down to sleep, and all that Papa learned was that in truth a big battle had been fought, that the Germans had been held, but that for some reason the English were retreating. Fugitives from Maubeuge direction had told a similar tale of the retreat of the French, and Papa

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groaned again and wandered out into the street to curse impotently as he watched the struggling tide of fugitives that still poured with desperate slowness through the town. "Perhaps it would be better," he told his daughter at last and very reluctantly, "for you to go away while there is yet time. Not for yourself, but for the sake of the little ones. There will be fighting here, as I see it. This regiment remaining while all the others pass through means a rearguard action, an attempt to cover the retreat of the others. But that is a plan without hope. There is only a handful of men left to hold the town, and they are worn to the edge of exhaustion with marching and fighting. The Germans will attack in force, they will sweep through the town and take the bridge. That no doubt is the plan, and holding the town and the bridge they will sever the English army and the retreat will be a rout. Yes, my child, you had better go now."

But the woman refused to go, to leave their little house, to drag her children out into the crowded roads on the way to nowhere; and after a little Papa gave up trying to persuade her.

It was a bare four hours after the weary

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men had found their billets when the alarm came that the enemy were coming. Papa shook his head as he watched the six men in his house rouse slowly and reluctantly, yawn and stretch and rub their eyes. "Four hours," he thought. "Of what use is a little four hours to men exhausted by battle and marching? If it had been eight hours' sleep now, who knows? They say these English are good fighters, and they might have held the town a few hours. But four hours . . ."

The men themselves took it differently. "That shut-eye done me good," said one. "If I'd a decent wash now I'd be as good as ever."

"Glad we're goin' to 'old 'em up here," said another. "This retreatin' game don't suit me none. I'd sooner stop an' fight it out."

"Dunno wot the blank we retreated for at all," grumbled a third. "They couldn't 'ave pushed us out o' that last position in a month."

"They do say the Frenchies on the right broke," said a corporal, the man with the smattering of French, "an' we had to fall back 'cause they'd left our flank open. Fancy it must ha' been something o' that sort too."

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They were hastily buckling on their kits when Papa came in to them. "Cheer up, Daddy," they told him. "We're not letting 'em come any further. But there's goin' to be a scrap here an' you'd better keep your tuppenny tucked well in or you may get hurt by a stray lump o' lead."

"Noos restey ici—compronney?" said the corporal, and Papa nodded his understanding. "Mais not posseebl' for to make victoire," he demurred. "Anglais ver' few; Allemands plenty, ver' plenty."

"Don't you believe it, Daddy," said the corporal heartily. "Beaucoo Anglaise to stop —haltey les Allemong. You'll see," and he got his men together and hurried off.

Papa had to admire the smart and business-like fashion in which the town was set in a state of defence, the houses commanding the roads loopholed, the street entrances blocked with barricades of transport wagons, the men distributed to the various vantage-points. But he had little or no hope of the result, because he saw how few the men were, how they had to be split up into small companies to cover all the many points which might be attacked. It was true that the defenders held the advantage of cover in the houses, but

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that would avail little against artillery; and the enemy had the advantage of being able to choose their point of attack and mass on it against the weakness of the distributed defence. Papa gave the defence half an hour at most to hold out after the real attack developed. As it happened, he was perfectly right in his surmise that a mere section of the defence would have to bear the full brunt of the attack, although he was quite wrong as to how long they could withstand it.

The attack came soon after the early darkness had fallen.

At first there was a quick rumour running round that a mistake had been made, that it was a French column that was approaching. It may have been this that deceived the defenders into allowing the enemy to come almost to hand-grips before the fighting began, and anyhow it is certain that the first sounds of conflict that Papa heard were not, as he had expected, a long-drawn rapid rifle fire, but one single and then a few scattered shots, shoutings, and the clash of steel on steel. For the moment it looked as if the first rush was to swamp the defence and break through it, since a seething mass of men fighting fiercely with butt and bayonet eddied slowly

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back and actually into the street of the town. Rifles began to blaze and bang from some of the upper windows, and then with a wild cheer a rush of khaki swept out from a side street and plunged into the fight. The fresh weight told, and although the defence was still outnumbered by two to one it was the stronger at close-quarter work, and the attack was driven slowly back and back until at last it broke and ran, leaving the street and the road about the outside of the town heaped with dead and wounded.

Papa Laval ran out into the street and began to give what help he could to carry in the wounded British, when he heard a whistling screech and the crash of a shell on one of the outer houses of the town. He ran crouching in to the shadow of one of the houses, and presently his straining eyes caught the quick leaping flash of the German piece and another shell hurtled over and burst in a hail of shrapnel about the entrance to the town. Papa ran back, and in a side street found a young officer and a dozen men breaking in the door of a deserted house. Papa guessed their intention, and since the officer fortunately was able to speak French, Papa could tell him a better house to choose, one

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taller and with a better and more commanding outlook on the point of attack. He led the way to the house and to the upper rooms, and pointed out the best windows, and watched them pile bedding at the windows and break out loopholes in the wall. All the time shell after shell was smashing and crashing down somewhere outside, and now the Germans began to fire star-shells that floated down in a blaze of dazzling light, blinding the defenders and exposing them as visible targets to the hail of bullets that came drumming and rattling in from their unseen foes.

Then came another fierce rush against the barricaded streets and the rifle fire rose to a full deep-noted roar, punctuated by the crashing reports of the shells and the boom of a gun that began to fire back from somewhere in the town. Down in the street the attack pushed home again to the barricades, and men pulled and dragged at the overturned carts and leaped and scrambled to cross them, and fired in each other's faces; and, where the barricade was gapped for a moment, thrust and stabbed with the bayonet and smashed with the butt and tore and beat at one another, until slowly the attack gave

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again and the barricade was made good. In the rooms upstairs where Papa Laval was, the men pumped bullets from the loopholes and the windows down on to the struggling mass that pushed in to the barricade, until a machine-gun was turned on the house and hailed a storm of bullets back and forward, across and across its front. The storm caught several of the men at the windows, and they fell back killed or badly wounded for the most part. A group of the enemy turned from the barricade, ran across and began beating at the door and the barred and shuttered windows. Half a dozen of the garrison, on a command from the officer, jumped from their loopholes and poured clattering down the stairs, just as a rifle thrust into the lock and fired blew it away and the door swung open. As the Germans rushed in they were met by the men plunging headlong down the stair, and in the passage and about the stair-foot commenced a wild and desperate hand-to-hand scrimmage. Somewhere outside a building had caught fire, and in the dim light reflected into the house-passage from the leaping flames the fighters scuffled and raged, scarcely seeing each other, stabbing and striking and singling

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friend from foe by blind instinct. The passage was a pandemonium of shouts and cries and oaths, of trampling, scuffling feet, of clashing steel and thudding blows, with every now and then the thunderous report of the officer's revolver reverberating in the confined space. The advantage of numbers was largely with the Germans, but the narrowness of doorway and passage made it difficult for this weight of numbers to come at the defenders and beat them down; and the British were not only holding their own but were even driving the invaders slowly backward, when the sound of rapid blows, the riving and crashing of woodwork, the clash and tinkle of breaking glass told that one of the shuttered windows had been forced.

"Get back! Get back and hold the stair," the officer was yelling; and his men, with one last fierce rush, drove the Germans further along the passage, turned and made good their retreat to the stair-foot. Then when the position looked to be too desperate for hope, there came from outside a burst of rifle fire, a fresh clamour of fighting noises, a hoarse yell of English cheers. A mixed mob of the fighters swirled past the open doorway, and a rush of khaki swung past and licked in

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after it, followed closely by a line of British swarming across the width of the street and running forward with bayonets at the level. Inside the house the panting remnant of the defence slammed the door shut, piled a tangle of furniture—tables, chairs, chests of drawers—into the passage, busied themselves re-securing the broken window, wedging a big table and the heaviest article of furniture they could find against it, and making all ready for a renewal of the attack.

But the attack was not again successful in reaching a point level with the house. Another attempt, made twenty minutes later, succeeded in coming almost level with the house, but it was too fiercely swept by the fire from the barricade, by a tempest of bullets from a couple of machine-gunners placed in position in some of the houses commanding the approach, and had to fall back without any result beyond an increase in the piled bodies littered about the street, the wounded crawling and writhing away as best they could out of the line of fire.

The fighting continued throughout most of the night, but never reached again the savage ferocity of the first hour, never came within such measurable distance of success for the

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attack. And at dawn the enemy withdrew and left the defence time to collect its wounded and tally its dead, and make all ready for continuing the fight.

And when Papa Laval came back an hour after to his daughter's house he found her busy making coffee for the corporal and one other man—the only ones left, as it turned out, from the six who had billeted there. The corporal's head was tied up, his sleeve and shirt-sleeve were slit their full length and stained a dull brown from a wound, the red-wet bandage of which showed round his upper arm when the slit sleeve fell back from it.

But he was quite cheerful, and turned triumphantly to Papa Laval when he came in. "Wot did I tell you, Daddy? Ici noos restey, eh?"

"You 'ave spik true," said Papa warmly. "Ze Anglais—ah, zey are ze brav mans—mos' brav—magnifique. I no tink it posseebl'—it was not posseebl', but zey do heem, zis imposseebl', and make ze victoire."

"It was a good scrap," assented the corporal modestly. The Frenchman assented warmly after he had had the meaning of "scrap" explained to him.

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"Good, good, ver' good," he said. "I, Papa Laval, who have seen much fighting in '70 and '71, say it was ver' good. So much Allemands an' so leetle—so not-much Anglais an' so fatigue, so tire they. Ver' much kill, ver' much blessés, what you say wounds, but zey fight on an' zey make victoire. I see ze Anglais to-morrow—no, yesterday—an' I say ze grande armée anglaise is feenish, is defeat. Mais, now I onnerstand heem no defeat, heem yet make ze good fight."

"Oh, we'll make a fight all right when the time comes," said the corporal.

By now the coffee was ready, and the two men drank it hurriedly and ate hastily of the meal the woman sat before them. Papa Laval was concerned about this haste. He would have had them sit down and wait till a good breakfast was cooked and then eat it at leisure and in comfort. The corporal shuffled a little uneasily. "You see," he said, "we got to be movin' on. Orders, voo savvy—les instruckshions à marchey; noos continuey le moshion à la sud."

Papa stared at him in bewilderment. "Mais—zat ees ze retreat," he stammered. "Pourquoi ze retreat après la victoire?"

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"Wot's 'e say?" asked the other soldier through a huge mouthful of bread and butter.

"Says why should we bolt again after lickin' the Germans," explained the corporal.

"An' that's exackly wot I wants to know," said the private disgustedly. "We 'as the bloomin' company near wiped out, an' B Company the same, and stands off the attack all right; an' when we've chased 'em off good an' handsome we has to up stick an' run away again. Bloomin' rot, I calls it."

"Steady on," cautioned the corporal. "You don't want these bloomin' French people to get no wrong notion about our runnin' away. Look 'ere, Papa, it's like this: Up there," he waved his hand towards the north, "we have le grand fight, battle. We win, voo savvy, la victoire c'est à noos. I dunno why we retreat after it—je ne comprong pas pourquoi le retreat, but—I mean, mais les instructions they says retreat. (Dashed if I know the French for 'they says.') Voo savvy, noos make le retiremong because—— (An' I've forgot the word for 'because' now! Oh, dash this French language!)"

"I onnerstand, m'sieu," broke in Papa. "The ordaire it is retreat and, parbleu! ze good soldat he obey ze ordaire. Quand ze

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ordaire ees fight, ze good soldat he fight; eh, is it not?"

"Egg-zackly," said the corporal. "Certi-mong, Papa."

"Bien," said Papa. "I know you spik true. I have seen ze Anglais fight. Zey are keel, peut-être, mais nevaire—how you say it?—run away. I have seen, and I know. I go now to spik it to ze peoples in la ville who is disconsole, peut-être, when ze retreat continue."

"That's it, Papa," said the corporal. "An' you tell 'em this army is never goin' to run away. When the order is retreat, we retreat, even though we don't like it. But one day the order will be to advance, an' then we'll show 'em. You tell 'em not to be afraid. The French is bound to win this war. We've come over to see it through with them, an' we're not goin' 'ome till we've chased every dash German back to Germany. You savvy, when the time comes, en avong is the order, an' avong we goes."

It is very doubtful if Papa caught all the meaning of this harangue, but he got the sense of it and the last words at least.

"En avant!" he cried, leaping to his feet. "Vivent les Alliés! Vivent les Anglais!"

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" If you two 'as finished 'andin' out bookays to each other," said the private, " p'raps you'll ask Madam 'ere if she's got a spare loaf we can put in our 'aversacks. There's the fall-in sounding."

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VI

AT ALL COSTS

ONE might have supposed it impossible for the Colonel to have found a single favourable condition about the coming fight. His battalion had withered away to little more than half its strength; that remaining half was almost completely worn out with want of sleep, with constant cruel fighting, with forced marching; had scarcely been brought out of the water-logged trenches to rest before being marched up into them again, had the prospect before them now of a desperate fight against enormous odds with no cover but the inadequate scratches that in those days passed for trenches, and with even these battered and smashed by shell fire, swimming in water and liquid mud.

It might even be difficult to understand any reason for his "Well, thank Heaven the orders are plain and simple enough this time," since those orders were "to hold the

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position *at all costs* until relieved," the words "at all costs" being heavily underlined, if one had not known the nightmare uncertainty that in the Retreat-Advance days worried the harassed commanding officers to a point of distraction. Usually the orders were full of instructions to do this if the Germans retired, to do that if they advanced in strength, to do something else if they attacked any one of a dozen points; to conform to the movements of a certain regiment, to support the advance or cover the retirement of another or another—to have, in fact, enough possibilities to consider and act promptly upon to have kept a dozen heads and a hundred eyes very fully occupied; and all, of course, in addition to the C.O.'s own paramount job of fighting his battalion.

So that after all there was some cause for his relief at the simplicity of the orders which this time bade him hold on "at all costs," even although it might well be that those orders were the death-warrant of himself and most of his remaining men. He had no doubts as to the nature of the struggle close ahead; indeed there was so little of a secret about it that every officer and man of the battalion was fully aware that the Ger-

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mans had determined on an attack which was to break through the thin British line. There was to be no manœuvring, no feinting here and striking there, no cunning tactics about this attack. The Germans were going to strike straight and hard and heavy, and burst through by sheer hard fighting and weight of numbers—"Leastways," as the brigade signaller put it in passing on this cheerful intelligence to the battalion signallers, "that's what they think they're goin' to do."

"I like their bloomin' cheek," said the signaller who took the message. "I wonder what they fancy we'll be doin' while they break through." The fact that a weak battalion of British infantry should consider itself fit to stem the advance of ten times their number of picked German troops did not appear to strike him in any way as being a piece of equally "bloomin' cheek."

The promised attack, however, did not develop for the next forty-eight hours, and during the whole of that time the battalion had to lie still and suffer such an inferno of bombardment, such a purgatory of bitter cold and driving rain, such a misery of knee-deep mud and crouching in painfully cramped

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positions, that at the end of the time they were openly praying for an attack, British or German, they did not care which, so long as it ended or even relieved the intolerable waiting.

"I made up my mind a month ago that I was bound to be killed," said Sergeant Billy Ruff of "C" Company disgustedly. "I'd sorter reconciled myself to bein' blotted out by a bullet, or blasted off the earth by a Black Maria, or skewered on a bayonet; but blow me if I ever counted on bein' drownded in a two-foot mud puddle as I looks like bein' now."

"Why don't the *soors* [1] come on an' fight it out?" said Corporal Smedley. "They *bukked* [2] enough about wot they was goin' to do. Why don't they *hitherao* [3] an' do it? I'm about sick o' this shellin' game."

"The shellin' is bad enough," agreed Sergeant Ruff, "but I'm sicker o' this swimmin' gymkhana. They ought to serve us out a cork jacket an' a swimmin' suit an' a harpoon a-piece instead o' a rifle, to play this game proper."

He was certainly fairly entitled to call the

[1] Slang Hindustani—"pigs." [2] "Talked."
[3] "Come on!"

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shelling "bad enough." It was the worst they had known yet, and that, for men who had been in it from the first days of Mons, was saying a good deal. The Germans appeared to have selected their portion of the front for the heaviest concentration of their artillery, and a rain of shells fell without ceasing night or day on the battered trenches. The men kept what cover they could, but that was little use against monster shells which blew to fragments them and their cover together. The British artillery was completely overwhelmed, and although it had struggled gallantly to maintain the unequal contest, was unable to afford the slightest relief to the suffering infantry. The casualties in the battalion mounted steadily, and apparently it was merely a matter of time until it should be utterly destroyed; but the men, although they grumbled deep and loud about the weather and the wet and the mud, the slowness of the Germans to attack, the bully beef and the biscuits and the missing of a rum ration, uttered no single grumble about the fate that kept them there or the wounds and death that carried them off singly and in groups.

At dawn of the third day the shelling rose

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to its highest pitch of fury. The wet ground shook to the roaring blast of heavy high-explosive, the air pulsed and sang to the shriek of passing shells, the crack of bursting high-explosive "woolly bears," the rip and thud of their shrapnel showers. The noise was deafening, the smoke and reek of high-explosive fumes blinding and choking. The flank of the battalion rested on a road which ran through the British and German lines, and the trenches to both sides of this road appeared to have been selected for the heaviest share by far of the bombardment.

"They'll charge across the open and down the road," said Sergeant Billy Ruff. "You see now if I'm not right."

"I don't care a two-anna-bit how or where they charges," answered the private he spoke to, "if so be they'd only be *jildi*[1] an' get on wi' the drill."

"Here they come," said the sergeant hurriedly. "*Dekko*[2] the road. Wot did I tell you? 'Strewth, an' there ain't 'arf a mob of 'em, I don't think."

"Hold your fire, men," called one of the officers. "Wait till they get well in the open. Pass the word—hold your fire"; and

[1] "Quick." [2] "See."

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down the line of the wrecked trench ran the order from man to man, "Hold your fire—pass the word—hold your fire."

So they held their fire, although on the other side of the road the trenches had already opened at the longer range. Deceived apparently by the silence into believing that the battalion had retired or been annihilated by the storm of shell-fire, the Germans poured out into the open and swarmed down in solid mass. They sang in a deep chorus as they came running heavily and waving their rifles over their heads.

"Blimey, 'ark at 'em singing," said Sergeant Billy Ruff. "Come on, my bloomin' canaries, you'll get somethin' to sing about presently."

And they did "get something." When they were within two hundred yards of the trench an officer's whistle shrilled, a line of heads and rifle barrels appeared above the parapet, and in one long rolling crash the rifles broke out in the "mad minute" of fire. Now, in the training of the old Regular Army the "mad minute" was a firing practice to which a good deal of time and attention was devoted, and a remarkable proficiency attained in the two essential respects of speed

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in firing and accuracy of aim. Since it was a practice in which this particular battalion had acquired a notable reputation at a target and range immeasurably more difficult than was now presented to it, the effect on the dense mass of the attack may be imagined. The front rank was simply swept away in the first five seconds of the minute, and for another full fifty-five seconds the bullets beat down on the block of men, chopped up and cut away the advancing face of it, exactly as a chaff-cutter slices to fragments the straw bundle pushed under its destroying knives. At the end of the minute the mass had come to a standstill; at the end of another it had broken and shredded away and was swirling back to cover with the relentless bullets still hailing after it and tearing through and through it.

"Funny thing," said Sergeant Ruff grimly, "I don't seem to 'ave 'eard no singin' lately. P'raps them Prussians 'as found out they come to the wrong room for the smokin' concert."

The respite was very short. Another mass of Germans swarmed out from their trenches and came on at a hard run, and again the British rifles broke out in a devastating whirl-

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wind of fire. The attack was pushed harder and closer this time, till the defenders of the trench could simply point their rifles and fire without putting eye to sights and yet not miss because of the nearness and size of the target. Again the attack broke, or rather it was withered and burnt away as it came and came into the face of the furnace-blast of fire; but this time the battalion did not cease to work bolt and trigger at top speed, because on their flank across the road the rush had come further and was already in places pouring in and down over the trenches. The regiment there had to give up the bullet for the bayonet and fight now for their bare lives; but the weight of numbers was too much for them, and gradually, still fighting fiercely, they were overborne, pressed back, thrust from the trenches yard by yard, killed where they stood in the parts where they still clung stubbornly and refused to budge. The regiment was practically annihilated, and their trenches were in the hands of the enemy.

"Now," said Sergeant Ruff, "this is where we gets ready to hang out the 'House Full' sign."

"Going to be a regular Guest Night in

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Mess, eh, Sergeant? and every prospect of a full table," said a youthful lieutenant, grinning—and fell forward in the sergeant's arms with the laugh still on his lips and a bullet through his heart.

The Colonel had been killed by a shell the first day, and before he went he passed the word to the next senior, "Don't forget, Major . . . simple orders . . . hold on at all costs."

The Major was not long in command before he was out of action with a shattered thigh, and following him Acting C.O. after C.O. was killed or wounded, until now the command was in the hands of the only Captain left in the battalion. And each C.O. in turn received or knew his simple orders—"Hold on at all costs," and no C.O. of them all had any doubt as to how they were to be carried out.

So it was that when the trenches on their flank went, and the immediate prospect before the battalion was of out-and-out annihilation, the Captain made his way round the trenches, splashing through muddy pools streaked and tinted with crimson, stumbling over the dead, stepping as carefully as might be over the men too sorely wounded to move aside, and repeated to his

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few remaining officers and senior N.C.O.'s the clear instructions, "Hold on at all costs."

"Not much doubt, sir, of how much the cost will be," one very junior lieutenant answered him.

"No," said the Captain gravely; "but we've done our job so far, and that's always something. Now we've only to make a good finish to it."

"We'll do that all right," said the lieutenant confidently. "We'll be cornered soon, but there's enough of us left to make them feel our teeth. And anyhow, we've made them pay a pretty full price already for this patch of ground," and he motioned with his hand out towards where the open out in front of their trench was carpeted thick with the German dead.

An orderly, stooping low, splashed along the trench to them. "The wire's through again, sir," he said, "and Brigade wishes to speak to you if you can spare a minute." He said nothing of how the wire had been got through, or of how its repairing had cost another good half-dozen casualties—which in itself is another tale well worth the telling. The Captain went to the telephone dug-out and crawled into the shallow, wet-dripping

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cave and called the Brigade and spoke with them there for five minutes. The Adjutant who was at the other end was an old personal friend of the Captain's, but chiefly because neither knew the instant the wire might be cut again they first talked strict business and left personal affairs out of it.

"Brigadier says to ask what chance have you," asked the Adjutant abruptly. "How much longer can you hold on?"

"Ten minutes after they attack in force," said the Captain with equal brevity; "fifteen with luck; twenty at the outside. Trenches across the road are gone, you know, and we're getting cut up badly with enfilade fire now. There's nothing to stop them getting round behind us, so I expect to be attacked front, rear, and flank. We can't stand that off long."

"They've managed to spare us a few companies of supports," said the Adjutant quickly. "They're occupying the line behind you now, and the moment they're ready they'll be pushed up to help hold your trenches and retake the ones on your flank."

"If they don't hurry," said the Captain, "they'll have the job of retaking both lots. By the sound of the firing I fancy the

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attack is coming now. I must get along and see."

"All right. Good luck, Jacky."

"Good-bye," said the Captain. "You know the messages I'd like sent if . . . And tell the General we held on to the end. Good-bye."

He was gone, and at the other end the Adjutant sat for some minutes listening to the empty singing of the wire. That cut off suddenly to the flat deadness that means a broken connection, and the Adjutant dropped the useless instrument and hurried out to try to catch a glimpse of the last act. It was little enough he could see, for a driving, misty rain obscured the view again; but from that little and from the fragments that he gathered after from the handful of wounded brought in, it was easy enough to piece out the finish.

The attack developed, as the Captain had predicted, on front, rear, and flank. Under cover of a storm of frontal and enfilade fire the Germans swarmed up along the rear of the battalion's trenches. A score or two of men were faced about to try to beat back this rear attack, but their bullets were as powerless to stop it as pebbles flung in the face of a breaking wave. The rear attack secured a

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footing in the trenches and began to spread slowly along them. Their progress was disputed furiously, but in the end the remnants of the battalion were beaten back to a point where a couple of shallow communication trenches ran back to the supporting trench on the one side, and another branched off forward to the ruins of the front-line trench. Even then a few score men might have saved themselves by taking the road to the rear. None did, but to the last man turned frontward and joined the handful of their fellows. In the end the remains of the battalion clung together to a few yards of battered trench that twisted about the telephone dug-out, and finished out the fight there.

Few as they were, it took some minutes to come at them, and before the last hand-to-hand scrimmage had finished there came from the mist to rearward a clatter of rifle fire, the rush of a charging line. The Germans had been so occupied with their task of clearing out the last of the defence that the fresh attack took them by surprise. The rescuing companies were in on them before they could face about to meet the charge, so that the charge went crashing home, swept the trenches clear in a wild five minutes'

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work, pushed the Germans across the road, and drove into the trenches there after them. At this critical moment another two companies charged in from the rear—companies in those days, remember, were given, and cheerfully accepted, the work of battalions, just as platoons took and did the work of companies; and the Germans, taken in flank and rear, were accounted for to the last man in killed, wounded, and prisoners.

The Captain was picked up in that last patch of trenches the battalion had held. He carried wounds enough to have killed a dozen, and his last word again was, "I'm glad we were able to hold on—till we were relieved."

They found Sergeant Billy Ruff, too, with no more than a few flesh wounds and a smashed leg. The Adjutant, in the piecing out of the end of the story, sat by him and asked questions while the sergeant's wounds were being dressed and he sucked hard on a damp cigarette. "At all costs, the orders was," said the sergeant at the finish. "An' that patch o' duck-pond trenches has just cost me seven-an'-six that was owed me by my corporal that's killed, a cock-eyed leg, an' a carcase full o' rheumatics for the rest

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o' my days; an' it's cost the army the finest set of officers that ever stepped, an' the best battalion o' fightin' men it owned."

"Amen to all of that," said the Adjutant. "But—you held on."

"Course we held on," said Sergeant Billy Ruff, his voice showing just a shade of surprise at the comment. "Y'see we was ordered to hold on."

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VII

CHEERS

THE General commanding the Division stood with his aide-de-camp watching the remains of his Division come out of action. It was one of those nights of the autumn of 1914 when the weather seemed to be doing its utmost to add every possible misery of cold and wet and wind and mud to the other hardships of war. The Division had been through a savage gruelling for days and nights past. They had borne their full share of all the fighting throughout, had been for weeks in action, had been decimated and made up with reservist drafts over and over again; had gone into action in this battle almost at normal strength, endured another murderous cutting up, were brought out, and in less than a day were sent in again to withstand another ferocious onslaught of the German infantry masses, the sweeping torrents of artillery and machine-gun fire. And now

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when the attack had at least for the moment been stayed again, they were coming out; and their General stood, unrecognised in the wet and darkness, to watch them and see in what shape they were.

He stood inside the angle where the road down which the Division trailed divided and forked, and where the battalions were diverted some down one branch, some down another, so that all were coming towards him, dividing and streaming slowly past him to either side.

The horizon out to the General's right was pulsing and flushing to the broad glares of the jumping gun-flashes, and by this glow and the flickering light of a broken farmhouse burning out to his left, he could see with unpleasant certainty the condition his Division was in. The men were dead beat. From boot-toe to cap-top they were so caked and crusted with slime and mud and filth that it was hardly possible to distinguish the shape, much less the colour, of their uniforms. They moved slowly, stiffly, dully, with stooping rounded shoulders, eyes looking emptily and vacantly to their front, feet dragging and shuffling over the greasy *pavé*.

And as each unit approached and passed, the General named them to himself with a

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pull and a twist at his heart-strings at each recognition, at the pitiful fewness of the numbers of what had been battalions and batteries. He had seen the first rough figures of the total casualties before he had come out —just the bare number of officers and men, without any mention of names, except in rare instances. But to him the adding of names could hardly have added to the hurt of his reading; for this was his Division, his own, his old Division, and there was no officer or man that was not dear to him. He knew too well that when it came to hearing the names he would be hearing of one after another of old and dear friends, officers he had lived and served, dined and wined, and shot and hunted with, men he had seen nursed up from raw recruits, had soldiered and campaigned with, who had known him for years, even as he had known them. The list had told of this battalion that had gone in 600 strong and lost 500, of that with two officers left, of a battery coming out with one gun, one officer, about thirty men and a couple of scratch teams; and of another that had not come out at all, had simply been wiped out.

As they dragged past, the General tried to see individual faces, to *feel* how the whole

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had stood their hammering, whether he could hope to see them nursed back to fighting strength and spirit. He knew how good they were, how good they had been—and who should know better; but he knew too what they had been through, had been up in the trenches himself during some of the worst attacks, and knew what the book laid down as the limit past which troops could not be tried, and afterwards, or for many months, recover.

For it has been very clearly and definitely worked out, on a basis of centuries of war, countless experiences with all classes and conditions of troops, civilised and savage, up to what percentage of strength a unit may suffer casualties and still carry on, the further point of loss at which they break, the last point where, broken and demoralised, they become a mere rabble, past hope of holding or of rebuilding.

And his Division, like so many others in the fighting of those times, had suffered casualties far beyond the known and recognised limit of endurance—and had still endured; had gone on and suffered to the further proved point at which troops broke and ran—and had not broken. But the question, now

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that they were out, was whether, or when, they would be a fit fighting unit again, whether their courage and spirit were shattered, whether they could be or would be trusted to go back, if they were ordered into the inferno again. He doubted, and reproached himself for the doubt, and yet could not but admit it and the good reason for it. They ought, by all the laws, to be broken and demoralised. Were they? And try as he would he could not see or feel the answer. They were still more or less in their own units; they did not straggle mob fashion; they still moved together with a certain amount of cohesion, a slow dragging of exhaustion, but yet—as he tried to believe—a certain ponderous steadiness that held some promise of rebuilding. His Division . . . his men!

"Which are those," he began once to his aide, but answered his own question. "Ah, I know—there's Sergeant Little! They're the Toughs, the old Rough-and-Toughs. God!"

The old Rough-and-Toughs trailed past, without lifting or turning a head, without seeing or knowing him, or, if they saw and knew, without giving sign of it. The

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remnants of another battalion passed, in the same dead apathetic fashion.

A new and unpleasant thought came to the General. Usually his men were quick, and as he liked to think because he was so proud of them, proud to acknowledge him. Why did they ignore him now? He was muffled, it is true, in a big cloak with a high collar up about his ears, and a waterproof cover over his cap—and thick mud over everything. There was only a flickering and uncertain light in the wet darkness, and it might easily be that they did not notice him standing there, or recognise him. But it might be that they did.

They knew he had sent them into this last fight, knew because he had issued an order saying so, saying he knew all they had been through, how low was their strength, how worn and weary they must be. But he had been asked if he thought they could stand another turn in the furnace of a desperate fight at once; and he, relying on them and thinking he knew what their own answer would be, had answered Yes, they could and would stand it. And so in they had gone again.

Did they remember this, remember that he was, as he had told them, directly respon-

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sible for the punishment they had been through again and for their suffering and their desperate losses: and, remembering, did they resent it and show their resentment by refusing to see him? That, he admitted to himself, would hurt, besides being a bad sign. A division that does not trust its own General . . . is better with a new General. Ought he to pull out, and let another try to rebuild their broken confidence in him and in themselves? He hated the thought.

He watched another battalion pass, and then as the head of the next came to the fork of the road where he stood, it checked, slowed, and halted. It was not a regular ordered halt, but merely a chance one, because the roads ahead apparently were momentarily blocked. But although this meant that they all might have to move on again at any instant, the men of the battalion at the fork snatched at even an instant's rest, some straddling feet wide apart and leaning heavily with folded arms on muzzles of their rifles, others squatting on their heels, others, indifferent to the mud and dirt and wet, dropping flat on the road.

The General peered through the darkness at a couple of figures standing a little apart from

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the men, and recognised one as the second in command, or rather the C.O. now, since the General had heard of their Colonel's death.

"My Irish," said the General to himself, and instantly making up his mind, moved towards the two. He might learn something of the condition of the men, and more, learn if his suspicions of their doubts and distrust of him were correct. He had a meeting with H.Q. ahead of him that night, and if the Division, his Division, distrusted him, he must resign his command. He could learn here, because these were the Irish, and if all or any had suffered by his order and were likely to feel it, it was his Irish. They had been cut up most murderously, had had their colonel killed—the Colonel they literally worshipped—and they had been so savagely handled in the previous fighting that it had been the one battalion out of all the Division the General had hesitated to send in again. So if any of the battalions felt sore about his order, the Irish should.

The gaunt figure of the Major turned as he approached, and seeing the General, saluted quickly.

"Desmond," said the General quietly, "I'm sorry; we're all sorry, about Pat."

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"He went in good company, sir," said the Major steadily, "and the way he'd best like to go—leading his own men."

"You've had a bad cutting up," said the General.

"There's others almost as bad," said Desmond gravely. "The Jocks have a bare sixty men and one officer left, I'm hearing."

"Yes," said the General, "and I'm afraid —I mean, I suppose I'm in some sense to blame. I sent you back into it when I doubt if you were fit, or if it was fair—your battalion especially."

"Don't say that, sir," said the Major quickly. "We'd never have forgiven you if you'd left us out, as we know you thought of doing. We were all quite ready to go in again, and know you wouldn't have sent us if we hadn't been needed."

The General spoke slowly. "I'm glad that my officers at least understand that, and don't feel——"

But the Major interrupted him. "Officers, sir! Do you think every man doesn't know, or that any man doubts you? Will you ask them, sir?" There was a movement down the blocked roads and a stir ran through the waiting battalion. "Speak to them, sir,"

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went on the Major quickly, "before they move. They'd take a word kindly from you this night anyway," as he saw the General hesitate.

"Very well," said the General quietly, and the Major saluted, stepped back and shouted an order; in a moment the men were on their feet and in their ranks.

The General spoke to them, spoke briefly, said he was sorry to hear of their losses, sorry to hear of their Colonel, paused to let die away the sigh he heard run through the listening ranks, and finished abruptly, "That's all now, men. You're just on the move. I'll see you after you've rested; and I hope I'll be able to rest you longer this time and not order you back into it as quick as last."

He finished quickly, glad that it was over. He felt, with a stab of pain at the thought, that he had suspected right, that the old link of confidence and mutual liking had snapped. The men had heard him in silence, respectful —or was it sullen?—silence, but without a murmur to show they understood.

But out of the instant's silence that followed, a voice came quick as a flash from the ranks: "Ye didn't order us back, sorr. Ye

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askt us." (It was true, too. The word he had given in sending them back had been, "I ask every man to face cheerfully——" So they had noticed and had not forgotten it.)

A laugh ran through the ranks, and out of the laugh another voice rose, clear, strong, and emphatic, "*And we're ready to go back again to-morrow if you ask us.*"

The laughter stopped abruptly, and instead there rose a cheer, a wild Irish cheer, lifting and thrilling spontaneously, and loud and long. It startled the General a moment. He had feared them broken and demoralised —and they were cheering like victors of a great triumph; he had thought their confidence in him gone—and they were cheering *him!*

He could not speak, but instead motioned to the Major, and as the order to march was shouted, he stood there, his hand touching his mud-spattered cap, his heart thrilling, as the ranks swung past him, with tired heads erect, and tired shoulders braced back, and the cheers ringing again as they tramped past.

And that was not all. As the last of them went by, the head of the next battalion came close behind. The General saw the officer leading them catch sight of him, and before

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he could check him, turn and shout an order. In an instant the slackened ranks had straightened and stiffened, the rifles had swung and twisted a moment and dropped to shoulder, and as the officer came abreast, gave and took the General's salute, from these men too there crashed a cheer, another, and another, long, eager, and sustained, until and after the last man had passed.

After them there came battalion after battalion, battery after battery; and each as they came to him, swung past, marching at attention, and cheering, cheering, cheering. The word had passed back that their General was waiting them, and each lot came shuffling and shambling up to the point where they knew the order to march at attention would come. Then at the word you could see the loose ranks gather and knit and lock, see the weary men brace up and make a last spurt to come past in good shape and show their General how fit they were; and come tramping past him, slowly if you like, but with heads up, steadily, and with ranks as ruler-straight as ever they were on a home parade, with every rifle sloped to the exact same rigid angle, with the long, even, unbroken sway and roll of the level lines of cap-tops and

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shoulders that tells always of perfect step and time.

The "Jaunties" dragged a last ounce of strength out of their exhaustion to pick up their perky little quick-step and twitch of the shoulders, and came up whistling their regimental march tune:

"Whether it's storm or sunshine,
Whether it's wind or wet,
Whether the weather we weather together
May be the worst we've met,
We can ruffle or rough it
Through all the goods and bads,
Cock a shako and let them know
We are the Jaunty Lads."

Then as the leading files came abreast the tune shut off and there came the regimental cry: "Jaunty Boys—hip, hip——" and cheer shrilling on cheer.

The Jocks came up, and at the word of command the scattered ranks slid together and the rifles swung to position, so slowly, so leisurely, but with such unhasting smoothness and sureness. There were a bare sixty left where perhaps six hundred had gone in a few days before; but they came past with the old hip-swing and sway of the kilts, the old proud, steady, striding swagger, and the

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cheers ringing fiercely and triumphantly from the husky throats. Sixty of them, only sixty . . . but sixty as good, grim, determined fighting men as ever came out of the hills of Scotland.

The remnants of a battery of Field Artillery came past with the drivers rigid at attention, the right arms outstretched over the off-horses' backs at the Drivers' Salute, the heads held rigid, the shoulders squared to the front —until the moment when each team dragged past, and the whips curved and swept at arms' length out and round and up to the perpendicular before each man's face, and shot out again to position over the off-horses' withers—and the cheer broke. Each team . . . and there were only three—a gun team and a complete wagon team, and one with four horses instead of six; the cheer broke, but such a thin pitifully weak cheer from barely a score of men where over two hundred would have been there to cheer on the way into action a few days ago.

So they came past, battalion by broken battalion, battery by fragmentary battery. Every battery and battalion of them was shattered and wasted to a shadow of its former strength; every man of them was

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dropping with fatigue, sunk-eyed and dazed with want of sleep, soaked and chilled to the bone, limbs tottering under them as they tramped. They were fresh come from days and nights in such an inferno of slaughter as men until then had never dreamed of. By all the laws of war, by all the rules of the game, they should have been broken and useless, demoralised, dispirited, without spark of life or fighting value left, without thought or heed for anything but a hope to be out of it and never to go back again.

And yet, coming from the slaughter-pen, they cheered; meeting the man who had thrust them into it, they cheered him—cheered like proud and proven conquerors of the mighty . . . as who shall say they were not?

Their General stood there a full hour in the soaking rain and the bitter cold, stood until the last man and the last gun had gone by; and would not have moved or missed one cheer or one salute for a king's ransom. And then he rode back to his quarters with his cold hands stiff on the reins and his feet numb in the stirrups, but such a warm glow in his heart as comes to few men to know.

In the *indaba* that night H.Q. sympathised

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with him over his losses, and praised the work of his men and said how much it had meant at a critical time. And when the Commander asked anxiously how it was with the Division after their mauling, and did he think they would rebuild and make reasonably good again after a rest of say a month—no, a couple of months, and plenty of fresh drafts, can you wonder at the glint in their General's eye, the lift of his head, the ring of pride in his voice as he answered: "I can only tell you what they told me themselves to-night—and what I know true—*We're ready to go back again to-morrow if you ask us.*"

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VIII

AN AIR GUN

MOST people forget, or even are not aware, that there was a Flying Corps in the field with the Contemptible Little Army, although it is certain that future historians of the War will not forget it, or the vital effect on strategy and tactics that resulted from air reconnaissance in the beginning.

Those who have known the Air Force only in its later and developed shape take the early air work as a great joke, and certainly the machines used then would now class as "comics" and the methods of air war then would be a screaming jest now. But there was plenty of good and serious work done then, although, at the same time, there were yarns of men, machines, methods, and "stunts" that had their humorous side.

There was one man of whom you may still hear many good tales, although unfortunately nowadays he is so forgotten, or is known to so

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few, that the tales have become legends, and it is difficult to collect details of some of the best of the stories of his shows or to sort out the wild fiction about him from equally wild fact.

"Elephant," or "Africa," Rogers was an oldish man by flying standards, somewhere between thirty and forty maybe, and before war had been a mighty hunter and big-game shot in various parts of the world. Like so many of the Oversea British, at the first word of war he packed and trekked to the coast, took steamer, and scurried home and into whatever unit offered the first prospect of active service.

What he did in the beginning I'm not sure, but he bobbed up in the Flying Corps as an observer about the time that the airmen were beginning to try "sky-scrapping," and were inventing all sorts of schemes for bringing the other fellow down. "Africa" made his knowledge and experience of scouting and hunting of considerable value in observing and reconnaissance work, and at first he was highly delighted to be on such a congenial job and be able to make full use of his skill. The reports he brought in soon came to be looked on as first 'class, and the more praise he got

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for them, and valuable he knew them to be, the keener he became on his work and on his air scouting.

He was rather annoyed when the air fighting phase began, because it was apt to interfere with the scouting and reconnaissance which he considered the really important, or, rather, only important and useful work of the air service. He admitted readily enough, however, the argument put to him that if his reports were valuable to our Staff, so the reports of German air observers on our troop and transport movement, etc., would be equally useful to the German Staff. But he still took little interest in air fighting. "There's no sense in it," he declared. "A couple of machines buzz round each other, popping off with pistols and things, wasting each other's time and using machines we're too short of as it is, when they might be reconnoitring and doing some real work. 'Tisn't as if they hurt each other. They don't, that ever I've heard of; or if they do, it's so seldom it doesn't count."

He began to take a different tone when, shortly after, out on a patrol he was bothered for a full hour by a German Taube that kept circling about him and taking pot shots with a rifle. It interrupted his work, especially

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as his pilot was naturally averse to keeping a straight course and paying no attention to the erratic dives and darts of the enemy machine. "It's all very well," he told Africa afterwards on the ground, "but the way that silly ass was barging about, he might have bumped into us any minute if I hadn't dodged."

Africa grumbled, but after this took up a service rifle with him, and then a couple of them and a good supply of ammunition. He and his pilot had a couple more scraps, and in these Africa blazed away every round, getting more and more savage every minute and at every shot as he saw no visible results of his shooting. He was positive he had scored some hits, and although he took in good enough part the uproarious chaff he had to submit to in mess when he stated his claims and beliefs of hits, he was undoubtedly a good deal nettled over the business.

He paid more attention now to watching for enemy machines and never failed to tackle any he saw while up, or to rush his pilot to a machine and into the air if a German was reported in sight. He wasted many rounds, and became more and more annoyed in each combat when either or both machines, after

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heartily shooting away all their ammunition or burning all their petrol had to part uninjured and go their own ways. He abandoned hope of ever bringing down a German with the service rifle, cursing the smallness of its bore and its "tenpenny nail of a bullet," and tried out various other offensive weapons which were then more or less in vogue. He carried aloft loads of little steel darts or "fléchettes" and hung breathlessly overside waiting while his pilot manœuvred for an upper position which would allow the darts to be dropped on the enemy's head; and he did the same thing with the primitive bombs of those days. The result with both was the same—nil.

About this time both sides were hunting for an effective air-fighting weapon and trying all sorts of dodges, and Africa, when he was introduced to a light machine-gun, plucked up his hopes again and took it aloft, fully satisfied that with this he couldn't fail. But he did, mainly because the machine-gun rarely managed to fire off more than three to six rounds before it jammed. In trials on the ground it always worked well and satisfactorily; in the air it never did. Africa decided disgustedly that air fighting was "*tkona* good" and—to the delight of his

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superiors and the Staff—turned his full attention again to reconnaissance work and useful reports. "If any of those black-cross brutes come dodging around and shooting at us while I'm hunting information," he told his pilot, "you just let 'em shoot, and we get on with our own palaver. They won't hit us in a hundred years anyway, judging by what I've known and what I've just found out about shooting."

But he returned one day to the drome sizzling with wrath because a beastly Allemand had attacked them, and, after a few rounds from a rifle, had hit the tail of their machine with a thing like an explosive cricket ball and blown half of it to ribbons.

"Rifle grenade, of course," said the Squadron C.O., inspecting the damage. "You were lucky to get back after it."

"Lucky!" spluttered Africa, and added a few lengthy and lurid remarks about luck and rifle grenades.

"Why not take some up and try 'em yourself?" suggested the C.O. But Africa would have none of them. "Rotten things," he said, "I've tried 'em on the ground at a target. I'll defy any man to shoot straight with them, and if they won't hit a barn door at fifty paces

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on the ground, what are the odds against hitting a machine moving at 70 an hour firing from another machine doing the same? No, you wait. I'm going home on leave presently, and I'll bring back something that's going to make these German fliers sit up with a jerk."

He wouldn't say what he was going to bring back, so when he finally went on his two- or three-day leave there was a good deal of curiosity in the squadron over his plans. The curiosity gave way to riotous and ribald laughter when he returned and unpacked and offered for inspection a rifle with a long barrel and a bore like a young cannon. "What is it?" and "What museum did you loot?" and "Yah! Robber! Who pinched the Dreadnought's gun?" and "Why not a bow and arrow, Affy?" were amongst the very mildest of the remarks that greeted the appearance of the weapon. But the mess fairly roared at sight of the ammunition and of the expression with which Africa's pilot regarded it. The cartridges were huge solid brass things, carrying a leaden bullet that looked as big as a man's thumb. "Aren't those eighteen-pounder shells, Africa?" asked one, and the pilot looking from the cartridges to the gun and back to the cartridges, heaved

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a sigh. "Peerin' into the hazy future, Africa," he said, "I can see myself bringin' home an observer with a broken shoulder and a dislocated neck or spine; that is if the recoil doesn't kick you overboard, or me 'n' the old machine out of the sky."

"You wait," said Africa serenely. "*Wacht een bitje.*"

"Ought to break things if you can hit 'em," said the C.O., picking up a cartridge and hefting the weight of it.

"Stopped more'n one full-sized elephant," said Africa grinning. "It's my old elephant-gun that I've shot all sorts of big game with. As you say, what it hits has to break. They're four-ounce bullets."

"Four-ounce? Bullets! You mean cartridges?"

"No, baas," said Africa. "Bullets. They run just four to the pound. Weigh 'em if you like."

And four to the pound they were—big, solid, ugly lumps of naked lead. Africa took a pocketful and his elephant-gun up with him on his next trip. He instructed his pilot carefully. "You dodge her about till I can get a fair shot, at anything round thirty to forty paces," he said. "You don't need to

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bother about keeping that range or position for more'n a second or two. I don't try to aim with this old gun; snap-shooting is good enough for me, and that's the sort of shooting ought to be most useful in this game."

It was some little time before he got a chance to try his elephant-gun tactics; but sure enough one day they ran into a scrap, and the pilot spent ten minutes dodging for position, while the German pot-shotted at them with a rifle and then an automatic pistol. Then came a moment when the two machines circled into one another and flew almost broadside on. The pilot, sitting behind Africa, saw him swing the huge gun to position, and apparently, before the butt had well touched his shoulder, "Bang!" it went off with a report like a field-piece.

"Must have fair blown the middle out of him," said the pilot, after describing the end of the German. "His nose and tail sort of folded up together—like shutting a jack-knife. Then the remains went down—wallop!"

After this there was a little less joking at Africa's expense, although many were convinced that his winning shot was a pure fluke and that he could never repeat it. They had to revise that opinion after Africa's next

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fight, where again, on his first fair shot, his enemy collapsed, went down and crashed in a heap of wreckage which burst into flames as it hit the ground. Both these fights were over enemy territory, so nothing was known of the details of how or where man or machine was hit; but in the next fight the hitting power of the old elephant-gun was clearly demonstrated in a fashion beyond argument.

On this occasion Africa was out on a reconnaissance, and unfortunately there was no machine on the drome in flying order when a Boche arrived and proceeded to drop bombs all over the place, with particular attention to the spot where the squadron's petrol was stored. He came low, too, taking careful aim and making several tries for the petrol, quite regardless of the frantic endeavours of every man on or near the drome, who could grab or find any sort of a shootable weapon, to fetch him down.

When he had expended his bombs, the Boche rose and sailed off for his lines, apparently no penny the worse for all the target practice on him. The men of the squadron stood watching him go, gnashing their teeth and saying things, until suddenly one shouted "There's one of ours coming back," and

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immediately after, "It's Africa!" The excitement rose to fever heat, and all sorts of hopes and fears were loudly and fervently expressed. "Will he see him? . . . If he can only cut him off! . . . What a chance for his old elephant-gun!" . . .

Africa or his pilot did see, and presently the squadron, fairly hopping with excitement now watched their machine swerve, cut across the path of the German, force him to circle, and then keep him dodging and turning and swerving in a manœuvring for position. The German made desperate efforts to break clear and continue his way home, but he was outflown, and found it impossible to escape. The wind was blowing towards our side and drifting the two machines back towards the drome and the wildly excited spectators of the duel.

Africa's pilot was playing for the position he knew his observer wanted; Africa was waiting, tense and strung, ready to open fire with his machine-gun, and still more ready and anxious to drop it and pick up the old elephant-gun he held gripped between his knees. The machine-gun was a concession to orders and the opinions of the reigning powers. Africa distrusted and was thoroughly contemptuous

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of it, but if he had a fight and came down without having fired it, had a vision before him of many written and long-worded explanations. So he gave first trial to the despised machine-gun. It is true, he did not waste much of an opportunity on it, merely loosing off a few rounds at hopelessly long range when he had for a moment a clear field of fire. The gun justified his poor opinion of it by jamming in a firm-wedged, cross-feed stoppage after the seventh round. Africa heaved a sigh of content, and hitched the big elephant-rifle up into position, ready cocked, with the butt snugged under his arm and the muzzle over the cockpit. Ready for real business now, he waited confidently, his head swivelling to the swing of the machine, his eyes glued fast on his target.

The machine he was on was one of a type then common in the Corps, a tractor two-seater, with the observer in front. His cockpit was just forward of the wings that stretched out to either side of him—the one above, and the one below, the body of the machine. He could shoot straight out to either side, on a line at right angles to the machine's flight, but nothing astern of that line, because there his bullets might cut away any of the bracing

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struts and stays between the two wings. He could shoot straight out or up, and forward to such an angle as would bring his bullets clear of the tips of his whirling screw, but nothing forward of this again because his bullets would hit the screw. The field of fire, you will see, was extremely limited, and a great deal depended on the ability of the pilot to bring the machine into such a position as gave the observer a chance to shoot. The Germans, of course, knew just as well as Africa did, the positions they could be in without being shot at, and the ones they could only fly in at the risk of a bullet meeting them, and for long minutes there was some rather pretty dodging on both sides for such a position as either wanted.

Africa's chance came at last, when his pilot dived in under the German and the black-crossed wings swept over him. In an instant the gun-butt jumped to shoulder, the long barrel swung up, and the wide-mouthed muzzle spat a long streaking flash of fire and a thunderous report. Nothing happened, and with quick automatic actions Africa jerked the breech open, slid in another long cartridge, snapped it to again, and hitched the rifle forward and to the ready position.

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"Missed!" he bawled back at his pilot, and made motions to get after the enemy again. Once more the two fell to twisting and dodging and swinging to and from each other, like boxers or fencers footing warily round, and each searching for an opening in the other's guard. Once the Boche secured position and rapped off a few shots; then Africa almost had an opening, and was actually swinging the butt to shoulder, when a sudden twist by the enemy screened him behind Africa's wing-tip. But at last another fair and square chance came, as his pilot swung in a sharp banking turn that brought them sweeping across the tail of the enemy. Once more the big rifle jumped and flamed and roared; and this time it was plain that it had hit, and hit hard. Their opponent lurched and spun wildly for a moment, steadied and righted, and with engine stopped went down in a long volplane, flattened out wobbling and swaying dangerously, and made a cross-wind landing that skewed and wrecked his undercarriage. Africa's pilot made haste to slide down and land close by the wreck, and the two were out of their machine before it had well stopped, and running over to where the German pilot was climbing slowly and

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clumsily from his machine. They only reached him some seconds before the squadron arrived in a heap, choking for breath, panting out cheers and congratulations, and thumping Africa and his pilot on the back until they threatened to hit back.

Then they proceeded to inspect their prize. The machine had suffered no further damage from the landing beyond the broken under-carriage, but Africa's bullet had done quite fully all the damage it required. He had fired into the tail of the machine you will remember. His bullet had slashed across the rudder, entered the fuselage, continued along its length, tearing, smashing and splintering everything in its path; had passed between the pilot's arm and body, gouging a solid wad out of his flying clothes, and cutting a gash through the muscles above his ribs that "might have been made with a plough-share," splashed the wreckage of his instrument-board about his astonished ears, passed on and punched a large hole in the near end of the petrol tank and blew a hole in the far end big enough to put your head through, killed the observer, carried on into the engine and utterly wrecked it, finishing its career by blowing two of the cylinders to fragments that, as

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some one said, "Looked like a paper bag you'd put a foot through."

The wounded pilot was allowed to look and at sight of the damage, and then of the gun that had done it, he was first amazed and then furiously angry. "It vas nod honest war-fights," he declared vehemently. "You shoots me, you mine sergeant kills mit ein cannon—ein feld-cannon. You vas butchereds."

He calmed down afterwards, it is true, and finally, as guest of the mess, drank an amazing amount of liquor and afterwards wrote a note (which the squadron promised to drop over the line), describing the frightful weapon and the damage it did. "Don't you worry, sir," said Africa, when the C.O. doubted the wisdom of giving information to the enemy of their new weapon. "I'll feel safe enough if ever they do arm their observers with elephant-guns. They wouldn't make a hit in a blue moon. That sort of shooting takes knack and a heap of training at snap-shooting. Yes, I can hit with it, but just because I've had a heap of those things, and in Zululand they have a native name for me that means 'He-who-shoots-once-without-looking-and-the-beast-is-dead.' Let him give 'em the tip, and they take it, if they like."

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So the German wrote his note, adding the information, which they gave him, that one hundred more Africans with one hundred elephant-guns and all equally skilled in their use were expected to join the Flying Corps from England any day.

"Make 'em think twice about coming within range of any of our machines for a bit," chuckled the mess; but unfortunately the note was never sent. The German tore it up after having a few more drinks and being allowed to fire a shot from Africa's rifle. The recoil knocked him flat and kicking, and after he had gathered himself and collected his wits and staggered back into the mess, he found his note and tore it up.

"I gonfess," he said mournfully, "I had thoughts that I my kommandant inform, and soon my comrades with new rifles likewise arm. I gonfess—I am soldier and it is for the Fatherland—I would my comrades help to shoot you. But"—sorrowfully, and fingering tenderly at his stiffening shoulder—"But not themselfs to shoot."

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IX

THE IMPOSSIBLE

A SMALL party of our infantry had been pushed up to the steep banks of a narrow stream, had taken up a position on the near side covering a little bridge over it, and had settled themselves in obedience to their instructions to hold it until a stronger force could come up to make it good. The party, small as it was, very evidently was thoroughly systematic and business-like, and in a very few minutes had scratched for itself what in those days did duty for a " trench," placed their one machine-gun in position to sweep the approaches to the bridge, sent out advanced pickets to points on the other side, and then, producing bully-beef and biscuits, proceeded to make an early lunch.

They chatted as they ate, and this being in 1914 just after the Marne, when our Army had begun to push the Germans back, the talk ran first on the prospect of being " Home

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for Christmas," on the satisfaction of advancing instead of everlastingly retiring, on "getting a bit of our own back," and on "chasing the Germans right to Berlin." All the men there were in worn and torn garments, the boots almost gone from their feet, their eyes deep in sunken hollows, their cheeks gaunt and drawn, their whole appearance showing plainly the strain and stress of the weeks through which they had just passed. But for all this, from the calm assurance and confidence of their bearing, to look at them and listen to their talk, one might have supposed them men who had never known the loss of a man, a gun, or a foot of ground, have taken them for part of an invincible army in a conquered country, instead of a mere handful of men in a far-advanced position, with an unknown number of enemies before them and their own supports an unknown distance behind them.

After a little the talk veered to certain crimes the German soldiers were said to have committed, sins against not only military discipline and the laws of war, but against civilisation and human decency. Almost every man there had a tale of this sort to repeat, but there were a few who doubted

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or refused to believe them. One especially, "Tam," a cheery, blue-eyed youngster in charge of the machine-gun, utterly discredited the tales. He defended the Germans stoutly. He had heard of, but he had seen none of these things himself, and refused to believe until he had. They were "no possible," he said, "no possible." These men were *pukka* soldiers, and what soldier would discredit his cloth and his regiment so? And besides, as he put it, "Whaur wad their officers ha' been tae lat them be daein' siccan like things? It's no possible."

"Officers!" said another man scornfully. "It was Rob Macdougal o' your own company that said he saw an officer shoot one o' ours lyin' wounded when they followed our retirement after Mons."

Tam argued the point at length, reminded them of the scuffle and scrimmaging and excitement of those times, and with clear logic demanded "What good wad it be t' them t' be killin' men they could just as easy ha' took prisoner?" He knew something of Germans, he asserted, had "kenned fine" half a dozen of them in his own town, and had found them "as nice an' civil-spoken a lot o' chiels as ye'd wish, an' as saft an'

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gentle-like as lassies." He was so emphatic in his defence of the German soldiers, and so scornful of the tales the others told, that they might have been angry, if it had not been for that dancing laughter in his blue eyes, the cheerful lilt in his voice, the good-humour that radiated from him even in his scoffing at them.

"We'll see, Tam," said one, "if we live long enough."

The sergeant in charge of the party had been keeping his eye roving over the ground before them. He spoke without shifting his position. "Don't move sudden any of you, but just take a *dekko* at the wood over there."

Before any one could look there came a sharp *rap-rap-rap* of rifle-fire, the whimper of a bullet high overhead, and the quick-following bang of one of the rifles of the pickets out in front. In a twinkling every man had slipped into the cover of the trench, had his rifle muzzle over the parapet and his fingers busy with magazine and cut-off. The ground sloped gently to their rear up from the banks of the stream, and the sergeant sent a signaller back to watch proceedings and pass any messages to connecting files with the distant

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supports. As the man moved rapidly up the slope a spatter of rifle-fire broke out, and the others looking back at him saw the dust-spurts jump from the ground round him. They saw him, too, turn deliberately and halt for a moment to spread his fingers to his nose before resuming his way at a more leisurely pace than before, and with the bullets still sputtering about him. The men in the trench laughed. "Fancy bloomin' shots, ain't they?" said one. "Missin' a full man-size target goin' straight away from them at four hundred yards. They ought to be shot."

"Dinna fash, laddie," said Tam cheerfully. "They will be shot in a wee minute, if Ah get my sichts on them."

Next moment the pickets came in sight dodging back under cover of walls and bushes, and trotted in over the bridge to the trench and dropped to cover. They made their reports to the sergeant concisely and clearly. "There's a biggish crowd of 'em workin' up through that patch o' wood," said one. "We noticed the birds there sort of disturbed, an' then saw helmets just before they fired."

"An' there's more up that stream I was posted on," said another. "There was muddy

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water beginning to come down where it was runnin' clear before. Some of 'em creepin' down below the bank, I suppose."

The firing to their front had ceased and there was an uncanny stillness there. Out on their right, somewhere beyond sight, a brisk battle was running to the steady roll of gun-fire and musketry, while on the left the regular *thump-thud* of guns told also of more or less sustained action. But beyond the bridge there was no sign or sound of war. The bushes rustled in a gentle breeze, the stream tinkled and gurgled pleasantly, the sun shone, pleasantly bright and warm, on green trees and grass. But none in the trench were deceived by the apparent innocence of the scene. "Tam," said the sergeant softly, "keep your eye on that clump o' trees one o'clock from the bridge. That's about the likeliest spot for a rush to come from. Go steady when the *tamasha* starts, the rest o' you. Pick a mark before you shoot."

Tam swung his gun round a trifle and trained it on the wood, fumbled out an oily rag, and began to wipe gently round the breech.

"D'ye no think, sairgint," he said, "that I micht try a bit burst alang the edge o'

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the wood? I daur say I'd stir them up a bittie."

"*Ikona* stir," said the sergeant. "The longer they hang off, the more chance o' our supports comin' up. I'm *cushy* about 'em waitin'."

Tam fell to a cheery whistling of "There was a lad was born in Kyle," his rag still busily polishing, but his eyes never moving from the wood-edge.

The peaceful silence ripped suddenly in a whirr of rifle-fire, a tempest of bullets whistling and hissing over, and smacking into the ground about the bridge. The men in the trench still held their fire. "Lumme," said one disgustedly. "Wot shootin'!"

Tam laughed. "Hoo wad ye like tae hae been sojerin' in a battalyun o' shots like that? Think o' the company an' battalyun prizes ye'd ha' lifted, lad."

"Here they come," said the sergeant suddenly. "Pick your marks. Now, Tam."

But there was no need of his orders. The men knew their work, and his words were drowned in the rapid banging fire of the rifles. From the edge of the wood a clump of men in grey burst suddenly, shook into line, and came on at a hard trot. The rifles

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in the trenches began to take toll of the line before it was well formed, and next instant Tam's gun began to clatter steadily. The line checked for a moment, but another lot of men swarmed from the wood, and it came on again. And from a low ridge and scattered clumps of bushes left of the wood another line emerged and began to run steadily in on the bridge. From somewhere in cover a storm of bullets came pelting about the trench, and in a moment one or two men were wounded and one killed, shot through the head. The sergeant was shouting, "Steady! steady! Give 'em the magazines when they're at point blank." The fire eased a moment, and then next instant broke out in the scourging fire of the "mad minute." By this time there were in the trench perhaps no more than a score of men in action, and there were certainly 200 to 300 Germans against them. But twenty rifles can do a lot of damage in the "mad minute" especially, pumping fire with the accuracy and speed that in those days convinced the Germans that they were up against massed machine-guns in the British Force. The attack was staggered for a moment by the fierceness of the fire that scourged it, the

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grey line hesitated, swayed, halted, swung forward again, checked, and—with men falling at every step—fairly broke and ran. But the attackers had barely reached the cover of the trees when their officers rallied them, swung them about and led them forward again, while from cover another storm of bullets poured and pelted about the trench. Through the irregular clatter of the rifles too there sounded now the steady postman's-knock *rat-tat-tat* of machine-guns, and the bullets streamed and beat about the trench like water from a hose. Man after man was hit, kept on firing if he was not completely disabled, or slid down to lie helpless in the bottom of the trench. The defending force was reduced to half its strength. And yet when the next rush came it was beaten off and back, and the remnant of defenders had time to draw breath and crouch listening to the clatter of fire and the hiss and whistle and whine of bullets streaming over their heads, to bind up their wounds and collect the cartridges from their dead, and make ready for the next rush.

Tam, at his machine-gun, had three wounds —one through the arm, another in the shoulder, and another across the scalp. He

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made light of them and laughed at the suggestion that he might not be able to handle his gun. "Bide a wee," he told the sergeant cheerfully; "I'll lat ye see in a minute if I can shoot or no—an' them tae."

The rifle-fire in front grew heavier, and it was very plain that the attackers had been reinforced. "Can't help that," said the sergeant, when some one remarked on it. "Our job's simple enough. Hang on as long as we can, and hold em' off to the finish. If the supports aren't here before we're done-finish, that's their pidgin, not ours."

There is little need to prolong the story. The supports were not up, and the little party held their pitiful trench, with man after man dropping, but with the remainder firing doggedly and still with deadly speed and accuracy; held their ground and strewed the ground beyond the bridge with German dead and wounded, and swept it clear of any others, time and again. But at the last the fire was too feeble to hold off the attack. Tam was still keeping his gun going, and two or three wounded men fired as best they could, when the last rush emerged from the trees. One of the two fell back shot through the head, and a second later the other slid

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down in a tumbled heap. Tam was alone with his gun.

He might have stood, and put his hands up and surrendered. He had been so positive about the certainty of German mercy, of anything less being impossible, that he could only have counted his life at least safe if he gave in now, even at the last minute.

But he did not give in. Instead he rose, stooped swiftly and lifted his gun, ran with it in his arms out across the bridge, planted it squarely down on the far side in the flat open, squatted behind it, and—opened fire.

The line of Germans, scattered and uneven, but pressing on hotly, swept closer and closer; the fire from the covering rifles and machine-guns hailed and beat down and round his solitary figure in the open; he was wounded again and again, streamed blood from a score of places, twitched and quivered to the thud of the bullets—but sat firm, his eyes glued to the sights, his thumbs pressed hard on the firing levers, his gun-muzzle spitting a steady stream of fire and lead. Even at this last minute, against these impossible odds, it seemed that his sheer strength of purpose, his grim courage might win. The line wavered and checked under the flail of his bullets . . .

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but rallied and came on again as his ebbing strength failed to hold the levers pressed, and his gun ceased, clacked again spasmodically, and finally stopped.

All this was seen by the solitary signaller from the crest of the low rise to the rear. He saw the lone figure reel and recover, sink lower, rise in a last desperate effort, collapse, and fall in a tumbled heap; and then, even as the nearest couple of Germans closed on him, try again to reach his beloved gun and remove some part of its mechanism to put it out of action. The watcher saw, too, the advanced couple of Germans come to the fallen figure, and stoop and raise his shoulders, and lift sunken chin from chest.

But this was all he saw, because at that moment the delayed supports, a couple of troops of cavalry, cantered up behind him, topped the rise, and swept at gathering speed down the slope beyond. The Germans by now were over the bridge and busy in the trench—too busy to hear the thud of hoofs muffled by the thick springy turf. They heard at last, too late to do more than grab—a few of them—for their rifles, and loose off a wild shot or two, or run scrambling—as most did—back across the bridge or down

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the steep banks of the stream for unavailing cover. The horsemen, without drawing rein, cut down the few who stood to the trench, swept on and crashed solidly into the mob on and beyond the bridge, rode them down, swung and turned, and rode, sabring fiercely, amongst them again.

It was all over inside a couple of minutes; and again the bridge was "made good."

Presently, in the trench they found every man of its defenders dead—except, to be sure, one man who lived minutes enough to tell of the manner of their ending. They found every man, the dead and those who, sore stricken and helpless, had still lived when the Germans reached them, found them pierced and slashed and gashed with gaping bayonet wounds.

All, that is, except Tam. They found no clean bayonet thrusts on him. He was dead —Tam, who had argued so stoutly for German kindliness and soldierly fair-play—dead, with his throat cut from ear to ear with the saw-toothed back of a German bayonet.

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X

LONG ODDS

THIS story belongs to an officer of the Canadians who at the time of its happening was playing a part in the opening months of the war as a private in the French Foreign Legion. In that capacity he saw a good deal of the men of our first Expeditionary Force, and although he is full of good stories of their amazing doings, he tells this particular one as perhaps the best and most typical example he met of the cold-blooded contempt of certain death, the calm indifference to consequences, the matter-of-fact tackling of the impossible which were such commonplaces with the old Regular Army in the first days, and which perhaps were the main factors in the performance of so many historic feats of arms.

It was during the Retreat, in the middle of that constant series of forced marches and hard fighting, when the remnants of retiring

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regiments were inextricably mixed, when the wounded were left behind, and the unwounded who were unable to keep up with their column or who strayed from it in the darkness found themselves blundering about the countryside, dodging groups of enemy cavalry and columns of enemy infantry, being fed and guided by the French villagers, working always towards the sound of the guns and struggling to rejoin their own army, that three just such stragglers after a careful reconnaissance ventured into the outskirts of a tiny French hamlet. One, the Canadian (who had been in Paris on the outbreak of war, and, fearing that it would be months before a British force could take the field, had signed on in the French Foreign Legion and so made sure of an early and ample dose of the fighting), wore the picturesque dress of a private of the Legion; another was a French infantry of the Lines-man, and the third a private of a British infantry regiment. The "khaki," for no particular reason, except that he apparently took it for granted that it should be so, more or less took command of the party, while the Canadian, who spoke fluent French, acted as interpreter both between the party and the French

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"civvies," as the local inhabitants were indiscriminately described by the Englishman, and in conveying the orders of the self-appointed C.O. to the non-English-speaking "piou-piou."

Inquiry of the villagers brought the information that there were no Germans in the hamlet, that a party of Uhlans had ridden through towards the south an hour before, and that nothing had been seen of any Germans since.

"Good enough," said the khaki man on hearing this. "I'm just about ready for a shut-eye myself after trekkin' all last night. We'd better lie up till it's gettin' dark again, and then shove on an' see if we can get the touch with our own push. You might ask 'em if this dorp has anythin' goin' in the way o' rations—rooty an' cheese an' a pot o' beer would just suit my present complaint."

But the village did better than bread and cheese. The village—women, old men, and children—escorted the three warriors to the estaminet in the main street and with voluble explanations handed them over to the estaminet keeper.

"Food? But assuredly yes—soup, good strong soup, and all ready and hot; an

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omelette, a very large omelette for three, to be ready the moment the soup was finished with; and then a veal stew, and cream cheese, and wine—wine white or red, whichever messieurs preferred."

"Fust class. Canada, tell 'er fust bloomin' class. I'll give up dinin' at the Carlton an' Savoy an' come 'ere reg'lar in future, tell 'er. An' how long before the bugle sounds for dinner?"

At once, they were told. If they would enter, the soup would be served as soon as they were seated. But the khaki demurred at that. "I must 'ave a wash first," he declared. "I 'aven't 'ad a decent wash for days. Just ask 'er if she'll show me where the pump is." He extracted soap and a very dirty towel from his haversack and followed his conductress out to the back, whence presently came the sound of pumping water, a vigorous splashing and mighty blowing.

"Come on, Tommy," said the Canadian when the other appeared again—clean, save for the stubble on his chin, glowing and rosy. "We've started the soup. Good goods too. Pitch in."

"That looks good," said Tommy, sniffing hungrily. He pulled down his shirt-sleeves

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and carefully deposited in the corner near his chair the rifle, haversack, and ammunition pouches he had carried with him out to the pump and in again. "But we don't want them Oo-lans 'oppin' in an' spoilin' the dessert. There ain't enough o' us to post proper pickets an' outposts, but wot's the matter wi' enlistin' some o' them kids for temporary duty? I'll bet they'd spot a Oo-lan a mile off an' tip us the wink if they was comin' this way."

There were plenty of volunteers for the duty, and half a dozen of the old men of the village hobbled off to post themselves at various points, each with several enthusiastic small boy gallopers in attendance to carry urgent dispatches as required.

Then Tommy sat down, and the three ate and drank ravenously. They devoured the soup, the omelette, and the stew, and were proceeding with the cheese when they heard the patter and rush of flying feet outside. Next instant one boy burst into the room, another followed in a whirlwind rush, and the two broke into breathless and excited speech.

The first dozen words were enough for the Canadian. "They're coming," he said

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abruptly to the others and jumped from his seat. "Very many Germans, the kid says. Come on, we must hustle out of this quick."

He ran to the door and looked out, the small boys following, still talking rapidly and pointing and gesticulating. The Canadian took one look and stepped back instantly under cover, the French piou-piou, who had followed close on his heels, doing the same. "They're not in sight yet, but from what the kids say they should be round the corner and in sight in minutes. They're coming from the north, so we'd better slide out south—or hike out into the fields and find a hole to hide up in."

"Comin' from the north, eh?" said the Englishman. He was quickly but methodically stowing the remains of the long loaf in his haversack, and that done slipped quickly into his accoutrements. "That means they're goin' on the way we was tryin' to stop 'em goin', an' pushin' up into the firin' line."

The Canadian and the piou-piou were engaged in rapid talk with the landlady and a few other women and a couple of old men who had hurried in. Tommy walked over to the door, stepped outside, and had a careful look round. "Look 'ere," he said

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calmly, stepping back into the room. "There's a good ditch on both sides o' the road. You an' Froggy 'ad better take a side each. I'll take the middle o' the road, an' there's a barrel outside I can roll out there for cover."

The Canadian stared at him blankly. "What d'you mean?" he said. "What are you going to do?"

"Why, we're goin' to stop them, of course," said Tommy, looking at him with an air of slight surprise. "You said they was Germans an' goin' south. That means they're goin' to reinforce their firin' line, so we'll 'ave to stop their reinforcin' game. Come on, you two 'ad better take cover, an' we'll give 'em socks as they come round the corner."

He walked outside and proceeded to roll the empty barrel into the middle of the road a little way down from the estaminet, which was the last house of the village. He left an utterly dumbfounded Canadian and an impatient and non-comprehending Frenchman who was rapidly reduced to a state of incredulous amazement by the information which the Canadian, after a long breath and a longer pause, proceeded to impart to him.

Now the Canadian, who is responsible for

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this story, openly confesses that the last thing on earth he should have thought of attempting was any resistance of the German advance, and more than that, that it was with the greatest possible reluctance he did finally join the imperturbable Tommy in the impossible task. He tried first to point out the folly of it.

"See here, Tommy," he called from the inn door. "You don't rightly understand. There's hundreds of these chaps coming, thousands of 'em for all I know, but at least a regiment from what the old man says who saw them. We can't do anything to a lot like that. We'd far better get off the grass while we've a chance."

But Tommy had planted his empty barrel fairly in the middle of the road and was settling himself snugly at full length behind it, his legs spread wide and left shoulder well advanced after the approved fashion of his musketry instructor. "They're goin' south," he called back. "An' we come over 'ere to stop 'em going south. So we'll just 'ave to stop 'em." And he commenced to lay cartridges in a convenient little pile at his elbow and push a clip into his rifle magazine.

Even then the Canadian hesitated. The

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whole thing was so utterly mad, such a senseless throwing away of their three lives that he was still inclined to clear out and away. But that prone figure in the road held him. He felt, as he puts it himself, that he couldn't decently leave the beggar there and run away. And a call from outside settled the matter by the calm assurance it held that the two of them were going to stand by and see the game through. "You two 'ad better be *jildi*.[1] I can see the dust risin' just round the corner."

The Canadian flung a last hurried sentence to the piou-piou, ran out and across the road and dropped into the ditch in line with the barrel. The Frenchman looked round at the women and old men, shrugged his shoulders and laughed shortly. "These mad English," he said hopelessly, "but, name of a name, what can a Frenchman do but die along with them?" and he too ran out and took his place in the nearer ditch in line with the others.

Tommy looked over his shoulder at him and nodded encouragingly. "Good man, Froggy," he said loudly, and then turning to the Canadian and lowering his voice to a confidential undertone: "I'm glad to see

[1] "Quick."

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Froggy roll up, for the credit of 'is reg'ment's sake—whatever 'is reg'ment may be. 'E was so long, I was beginnin' to think 'e was funkin' it." The Canadian admits to a queer relief that he himself had not "funked it," but he had little time to think about it.

A thin dust rose slowly from the road at the distant bend, and "'Ere they come," said Tommy. "Don't begin shootin' till I do. We want to get into the brown of 'em before we start, an' we haven't cartridges enough to keep goin' long. I think about four 'undred should be near enough the range, but I'll try a sightin' shot first at that an' you'll see where it lands."

For long interminably dragging minutes the three lay there, and then suddenly, in a bang that made him jump, the Canadian heard the soldier's first shot. "Just short," said Tommy coolly. "Better put your sights four-fifty an' take a fine sight. Come on, let 'em 'ave it."

The three rifles opened in a crackle of rapid fire, and far down the road a swirl of dust and a stampede of grey-coated figures to the sides of the road showed the alarm that the sudden onslaught had raised. It took several minutes for the crowd to get to any sort of

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cover, and before they did so they evidently began to understand how weak was the force opposed to them. The grey mass dropped to the road and next minute a steady drum of rifle fire and a storm of bullets came beating down on the three. The road was *pavé*, floored with the flat cobble-stones common on first-class French roads, and on these the bullets cracked and snacked with vicious emphasis, ricochetted and rose with ugly screams and whirrs and singings. A dozen times in that first minute the hollow barrel banged to the blow of a bullet, but the figure behind it kept on firing steadily and without a pause. And presently the Germans, impatient of the delay perhaps, or angered by the impudence of the attack of such a handful as they were now sure blocked the way, began to climb over the fence along the roadside and move along the fields firing as they came, while another group commenced to trot steadily straight down the road. "Now then, Canada," called Tommy, "pick your target an' tell Froggy we'll fire in turns. We can't afford to waste shots."

So the three commenced to fire steadily and in turn, each waiting after the other's

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shot to see if a man fell, each calling to the others in triumph if a man went down after their shot, growling angrily if the shot missed. They made good shooting amongst them, the man in the middle of the road an unmistakable best and the Canadian second. Their shooting in fact was so good that it broke the attack down the road, and presently the remainder of this force ran crouching to the ditches, jumped into them, and stayed there.

But because the ammunition of the three was almost gone the affair was almost over, and now there appeared a new factor that looked like ending it even before their cartridges gave out. Back in the ranks of the main body three or four men grouped about a machine-gun opened a rapid fire, and the hailing bullets clashed on the walls of the estaminet, swept down on to the stones of the *pavé*, found their range and began drumming and banging on the barrel. The soldier beside it quietly laid down his empty rifle and looked towards the Canadian. "I'm done in," he called. "Punctured 'arf a dozen places. . . . You two better keep down . . . let 'em come close, then finish it . . . wi' the bayonet."

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That struck the Canadian as the last word in lunacy; but before he could speak, he saw the barrel dissolved in splintering wreckage about the figure lying on the road. Tommy raised his head a little and called once more, but faintly: "Good fight. We did all we could . . . to stop 'em. We did stop 'em all . . . for a bit . . . an' we stopped a lot for good." A gust of bullets swept lower, clattered on the stones, set the broken barrel staves dancing, hailed drumming and thudding on the prone figure in the road.

Both the Canadian and the Frenchman were wounded severely, but they still had the strength to crawl back along the ditch, and the luck to emerge from it amongst the houses in time to be hidden away by the villagers before the Germans arrived. And that night after they had passed through and gone, the Canadian went back and found the body of the soldier where it had been flung in the ditch—a body riddled and rent to pieces with innumerable bullet wounds.

The Canadian had the villagers bury the body there close outside the village, and wrote on a smooth board the number and name he took from the identity disc about the dead man's neck. And underneath it he

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wrote in indelible pencil: "A good fighting man," and the last words he had heard the fighter gasp—"We did all we could to stop them; stopped them all for a bit and stopped a lot for good."

And as the Canadian said afterwards, "That same, if you remember their record and their fate, being a fairly close-fitting epitaph for the old Contemptible Little Army."

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XI

AMMUNITION SUPPLY

THE farm where the Divisional Ammunition Column was billeted and bivouacked was far enough from the line to be out of any but the longest shell range, but near enough to allow the growling rumbling thunder of the guns to be heard very distinctly. As was usual in those early months of the war, the air was very full of rumours, but very empty of real information, and back in the Column men knew little of how the battle on their front was running. The rise and fall of the gun-fire told certainly of the sinking or swelling intensity of the fight, and there was an ominous certainty as time wore on that the noise of the battle-line was coming closer and closer: that, in other words, our line was being forced steadily back. The Column had some confirmation of this fact in the word brought back from time to time by the men they had stationed

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up front to bring back the requisitions for ammunition, and from those who trekked the shells up to the guns.

The sections of the Column which supplied the 18-pounder batteries only took up their loads as far as the Brigade Ammunition Column, which again carried it on to the batteries; but one section which handled the ammunition of the Heavies and Hows (60-pounders and howitzers) took their wagons right up to the battery lines close behind the guns, and the men of this section especially were able to bring back a good deal of information of how affairs were going, and a great deal more of rumour and what they heard from all sorts of combatants and casualties.

The sum total of fact and rumour was that the line was "having a thick time," that it was being attacked fiercely by heavily outnumbering forces, and—this being of especial as it was of professional interest to the Column—that our forces were completely outgunned, and were not able to return one shell to the Germans' score. The reason for this last too was not only that the enemy had many more and heavier guns, but that they appeared to have an unlimited supply of

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shells for them, while our guns were kept rigorously down to a slow rate of fire to husband the scanty ammunition.

This was the position of affairs when a couple of wagons returned to the Column in charge of an N.C.O., who bore a requisition for a further supply of ammunition and an urgent note asking that it should be sent with the least possible delay. The non-com. who delivered the note to his C.O. knew well what the contents were, and when he rejoined his fellows he passed the word that they'd better have the next teams for duty standing by, as they'd be getting orders next minute to take their loads up in the worst kind of a hurry. His remark did not create the bustle he expected, and the other non-coms. explained briefly, "There's no orders to turn out comin' yet. There's not a round in the section."

The first man gaped at them. "Not a round!" he repeated in amazement. "What's happened? I didn't meet any of our other wagons going up."

"You didn't," he was told, "because none have gone. You took the last loads we had, and there's nothing come from the Park since. The Old Man has sent about half a dozen

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urgent chits back to them to shove along some stuff; but none's come."

A couple of hours later a messenger spattered up the wet road, swung off his steaming horse, and hurried in to his C.O. He, too, bore an urgent note asking for immediate supplies, to which the O.C. Section, after a brief consultation with the Adjutant, sent a reply that there were no shells in the Column and that they would be rushed up the moment they came in from the Park. And one more urgent note was sent back to the Park.

Later again the captain commanding the Brigade Column came pounding in. He, too, hurried to the Adjutant and the O.C. Column, and emerged from his interview red-faced and stamping with anger and impatience. Before returning to his own Column he had a talk to one of the Section Commanders, and expressed himself rather freely on the slackness or indifference of the Park. "Here's the line getting blown to ribbons," he said hotly, "and guns pounded to pieces; and we can't attempt to keep down the fire because we haven't shells enough. And all the urgent chits I get and pass back to you don't bring up a round, because the confounded Park don't send it. Pretty state of affairs, isn't

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it? A whole Divisional Ammunition Column without a blessed round to its name for over half a day in the middle of a hot action. It's scandalous. It's——"

"It's all that, old man," said the O.C. Section. "But the best I can do is to promise you'll get the stuff up just as quick as we can rush it—when it comes."

Every man in the Column knew by now how matters stood and they also had scorching remarks to pass on the Park. Late in the afternoon one of the Park officers slithered in on a motor-cycle, visited the Adjutant, and departed again. The word filtered round and down to the men presently that they might expect the Park lorries in almost any time, so that no one was surprised when orders were issued to stand by, to be ready to rush the transference of the ammunition from lorries to wagons and be off with it to the front the moment it arrived.

Each section officer went round with his N.C.O.'s and saw that these orders were carried out to the last possible detail, and took the opportunity of impressing on the men that if they weren't loaded and away before any other section had a wheel moved——!!! But there was little need to urge the men,

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because they knew only too well what the line was undergoing for lack of shells, and they were just as anxious as their officers to get the ammunition up at the first minute possible. Everything possible was done to cut out any waste of time in getting on to the road when the Park lorries came. The horses were harnessed and the teams hooked in to the empty wagons and kept standing there, the men hung about, the drivers booted and spurred and leg-ironed, the gunners detailed in batches and ready to rush the loading work. All the rest of the afternoon they waited, grumbling and fidgeting, staring down the empty road for any sign of the lorries, turning to listen to the grumbling roll of the guns. At sundown the teams were taken out one at a time, each one led to the watering place and scantily watered, brought back and hooked in before the next was unhooked for watering. The men had their tea in batches, eating and drinking hastily, squatted about in the barns and sheds out of the rain, but ready to jump and run at the first warning shout of the lorries' approach.

But tea was finished, and the water and feed finished, and still there was no sign of

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the lorries. The men waited about in the gathering dusk, and on into the darkness, talking and grumbling, guessing and speculating, falling to silence every now and then, and listening to the steady gun-fire.

Two or three mounted messengers splattered and squelched in during the evening, but after delivering and receiving notes departed as hastily as they had come and without any time to impart to the Column men a tithe of the news they so desperately wanted to hear.

"They're gettin' hell up there," one man paused long enough to say. "Rush that stuff up when it comes."

"My oath!" "We'll break records." . . . "Tell the boys there we're comin' at the trot, canter, an' gallop first minute we can," the men shouted after him as he moved off.

Another of the messengers stayed to change his saddle to a fresh horse, and he swallowed tepid tea and answered a few more questions. His news was still more depressing. "Some of the batteries is down to limber supply," he said, "an' been dolin' out the last rounds like they was diamonds. . . . We lost some villages again I heard; an' one a battalion o' the Jocks lost an' took again wi' the bayonet

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an' was just about wiped out. We're killing Germans in millions, the inf. doin' it all because we can't support proper. But the faster the *soors* are killed, the more of 'em comes swarmin' on. Yes, some o' the batteries has copped it bad. . . . Yes, our Brigade's too."

One of the men asked anxiously if there was any word of a certain battery. "Hundred an' teenth," said the messenger, preparing to mount. "Haven't you heard o' them? Wiped out solid—every man an' gun blown to bloody rags."

There was a chorus of growls and low oaths, and the man who had asked the question said dazedly, "Hundred an' teenth. You sure?"

"Sure enough," said the messenger and swung to the saddle. "That was yesterday I heard that. Blown to bloody rags." And he moved off.

The other man stared after him a moment. "I'd two brothers in the Hundred an' teenth," he said slowly, and that was all.

It was nearly midnight when word came from the Park again that the lorries could not arrive before daybreak next morning, and the men were told they could turn in "all

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standing" and dressed to boots and spurs ready to jump out in a hurry. The teams were unhooked and the horses led to their extemporised stables in sheds or rough shelters of hop-poles covered with branches and sacking. But even after they got permission to turn in many of the men lingered, talking, and listening to the roar of battle and watching the gun-flashes flickering and jumping beyond the horizon, and trying to gauge whether the sounds and lights were nearer or farther. And when they did turn in, some of the gunners, rather than risk the delay of a call and few minutes' run from their billets, slept in the empty wagons or under them on the wet ground.

Long before daybreak every man was astir and out, had breakfasted hurriedly, and was ready waiting. Most of them carried their mess-tins of tea and their food to some place in the barn doorways or under the eaves, where they could eat and still keep an eye on the road down which the lorries would come. The teams were brought out and hooked in again, being taken one at a time as overnight to water, and the nosebags hung on them after they were hooked into their places in the wagons.

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Daybreak came slowly—a wet, grey, drizzling day. More messages came from forward, came by messengers angered to black bitterness, filled with anguishing tales and rumours of broken battalions shelled piecemeal from their ground, of batteries sitting helpless and unable to reply to the torrents of shells that swept them and the infantry; a string of ambulance motors came and passed the end of the Column's road, moving with the slow careful driving that speaks always so eloquently of the loads they bear.

But no lorries came from the Park.

By noon the men's excitement had risen to a restless wrath. They failed utterly to understand or argue out a solution of the mystery. There were the guns up front idle for want of shells; there were the infantry getting wiped out for want of artillery support; there were they sitting waiting with the teams hooked in ready to rush the stuff up; and the Park lorries didn't come. It was beyond them. The Park had been given wrong orders, surmised some, and had sent the stuff to the wrong place; or some fool had led the convoy wrong and they were wandering round France searching for the Column; or perhaps the Park hadn't got

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the shells to send. But this last idea was scouted. In those days the batteries of a Brigade were supplied by the Brigade Columns, the Brigade Columns of a Division by the Divisional Columns, the Divisional Columns by the Ammunition Park. Beyond this the men knew little and vaguely of supplies from base and home, but the knowledge they had made it plain that if the Park had no shells neither had the Divisional Columns, and . . . as one gunner said, "If the Park has no ammunition left, it's *mafeesh* the war—after we're *mafeesh*."

"It's bad enough," said another. "We've sent nothing up for a full day, an' there can hardly be a ruddy round left wi' the guns o' the whole Division. Poor bloomin' inf. in this bloomin' Div. anyhow."

At noon horses and men were fed again in the same fashion as before, and the men fell back on their fretful watching for the lorries, their apprehensive listening to the gun-fire that in the last few hours seemed to have grown stronger and louder and nearer.

Then at three o'clock there came a yell from some men down the road—a triumphant yell and a rising cheer. "The lorries—the lorries!" The word ran from mouth to

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mouth; the cheers rose until a shrill blast of a whistle cut them short. In an instant the road was a bustle of activity, the drivers tightening girths, the gunners flinging off their wet coats and swarming round their wagons.

Only one lorry had appeared yet, and it slithered and scrunched cautiously up the rough side road, half a dozen men running alongside and shouting directions and questions at the driver and an officer sitting beside him. As they saw the gunners pointing and the lorry swing down the side road that led to their wagons the men of No. 4 Section broke into yelling cheers.

"First load to us—here y'are—this way, No. 4."

"Save your wind, men," advised the section officer. "The lorries for No. 3 would have turned off before they came this far. They may be loading up now. We've got to get away first, remember. On to this lorry, the lot of you. The others'll be here before this is clear."

The lorry lurched in to the side of the road and halted, and before it had stopped the men were on it and swarming in over the tail-board. There was an amazingly scanty

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load on board, but without stopping to consider this the men fell on the boxes like starving wolves upon red meat, jerked the tail-board clear, and began to swing the boxes out.

The Section Commander was standing on the step talking to the Park officer, who was fumbling under his coat for papers. "My Lord," said the section officer, "you fellows haven't hurried yourselves, have you? Never mind, now you're here. Let's have your papers and sign. We'll off-load you in a wink. What you brought? Heavies, I hope? They want it most."

A fierce yell from inside the lorry interrupted him, and next instant his sergeant was out and round beside him. "There's something wrong, sir," he almost shouted, "nothing there but six boxes of Four-five, and a lot of fuses and revolver ammunition."

"I'm afraid you'll find this rather a sell, old man," said the Park officer wearily. "There's just about what he says there is."

The section officer dropped back off the step. "For God's sake," he stammered, "what d'you mean? When — where — where's the rest?"

The other clambered stiffly down. "Where's

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your Adjutant?" he said. "I've a note for him. No, there's no more coming."

"What about the other sections?" asked the Section Commander eagerly. "Have you brought any 18-pounder for them?"

"Not a round," was the blunt reply. "Ah, here's the Adjutant; and your C.O., isn't it?"

"Yes; looking for you, I fancy. I'll push off back and unload your measly handful of stuff," and he turned again to the lorry.

"This driver, sir," said his sergeant, jerking a head towards the lorry, "he tells me"—sinking his voice—"there's no more coming up, 'cos there isn't a blessed round left in the whole of the Park. D'you think, sir——"

"Not much use thinking," said the section officer bitterly. "Get it off-loaded one-time. We have to send a batch of men to the batteries to-night to replace casualties, and this handful can go with them. Won't the batteries say something when they see it too."

"Don't it sound as if the gun-fire was slacking off, sir?" said the sergeant. "I've been listening——"

"If it is," said the officer, "it means one of two things. Either we've stood 'em off again, or they've swamped the front line.

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And without artillery support and with that weight of gun-fire against them we can't blame the poor old inf. if they have been run over. Anyhow, I fancy we'd better get things ready to pack up and trek in case we get orders to move. And we'll have rifle inspection this afternoon, and see every man has his bandolier full. If we can't help the line with shells, perhaps they'll let us wade in and be useful with what rifles we've got. It may come to it too."

He spoke bitterly, but no more bitterly than he felt, and no shade more than the men spoke and thought. They were kept on the rack for the rest of that day, standing by their waiting teams, hoping and watching and praying for sight of the loaded lorries rolling up the road, listening to the roll and roar of the distant battle, speculating on its varying cadences, imagining, or rather knowing, the inferno the line was enduring, grudging and resenting blackly and bitterly their own inaction and inability to help.

It was not until days after that they learned, patchily and scantily as usual, the result of the action, the tale of the German attack dying away just when one more push against our weakened line, left practically without

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artillery support, must have succeeded; the old story of the Germans who had practically won and didn't know it, of the British who were practically beaten and *would* not know it. But that knowledge only came to the Column later, and on that second afternoon they were still "standing by," waiting and hoping against hope for supplies, when the Brigade Column Commander came back to them again.

He found one of the Section Commanders waiting by the roadside as he came past, and stopped, dismounted, and talked with him a little, the rumble and bump of the guns forming a background to their talk.

The talk was bitter enough and gloomy enough.

They spoke of the punishment the line was enduring, of the horrible fix the Army was in if this shortage of shells meant, as it evidently must, the exhaustion of home supplies; and then they paused to listen to another prolonged roar of gun-fire that beat gustily back to them.

"It's rather funny," said the Column Captain slowly, "to think of this fix we're in now, and that it's only a few months ago that some people were raving and fighting against

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Army Estimates and expenditure, and arguing that we'd spent enough, that we were as prepared as we need be, that we were ready for war." He paused and laughed shortly and repeated, "Ready for war! It's rather a joke."

Again the gun-fire rose, rumbling and roaring and bellowing. One might easily have imagined that the guns—the German guns—were shaking themselves with hoarse Titanic laughter over that joke.

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XII

"OPEN-EYE," FROM DOWN-UNDER

IF you ask any Australian or New Zealander or Canadian or South African where their respective fighting men made their first appearance in the war, you will almost certainly be told it was in the sands of Egypt or the beach at Gallipoli, in the standing trenches of the Western front, or the veld of the German Africas. But all the Oversea Dominions had a small finger in the pie before that, and there were few of them, and few of the countries in the world that support a British population, that had not some representatives in the first fighting in France in the First Expeditionary Force which bore the brunt of battle from Mons and the Marne to Ypres in 1914, and were practically wiped out inside the first six months of the war.

Some of these men enlisted on the first outbreak of war; others, shirking the delays of training and eager to be in the first flight,

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went in all sorts of odd jobs, as motor dispatch riders or transport drivers, ambulance workers or interpreters. These were the men who were in Europe when war was declared, and must not be confused with the many thousands of others who, at the first word of the war, forsook their ranches and offices and estancias, lumber camps and mines and mills, stations and compounds and plantations, and came hot-foot, and as fast as hoof or wheel could bring them, to their nearest port, and thence by the first or fastest steamer to London, to join up and play a hand in the great game. There were hundreds of these, perhaps, to ones of those others I spoke of, the men who had the honour of fighting in the ranks of the first "Contemptible Little Army," who for the most part share graves, as well as honours, with the Old Contemptibles.

Bobby Steele was an Australian who happened to be making the trip home in the summer of '14, and who, on August 5, hurriedly sought a cavalry barracks and the King's shilling. He did not go over with the first Expeditionaries, but, because he was an excellent horseman and a first-class shot, was razor-keen on his drill, and worked like a nigger at it (as indeed every recruit and

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reservist in barracks did in those days), he went over in the first draft to his regiment, and so missed little of the first fighting.

He joined up at the time when, just after the Marne, both sides were discovering that frontal attacks against entrenched positions were expensive performances, and that outflanking moves offered great opportunities; and when both sides promptly set about trying to outflank and encircle the end of the other's line and play the Dickens with it. This, of course, was largely cavalry work, and some very pretty cavalry work it produced, to say nothing of some feats almost surprising enough to be incredible.

When he joined it, Bobby Steele's regiment, like so many others, was very busy feeling for the enemy's cavalry, and when it found them missing no slightest chance of proving in a knee-to-knee cavalry charge that they were more than a match for the best Uhlans or Death's Head Hussars that ever swung a sword or shook a lance. The regiment was proceeding at a walk one day on a long straight road leading up a gentle slope into a village, an "advance point" well on along the road in front of them, and a screen of men strung at intervals across their front and along their

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flanks. This advance screen was rather hampered in its movements because the country through which the road ran was a good deal cut up by hedges and wide ditches—obstacles, which might do little to check the free, straight-line advance of a hunting field, but a considerable hindrance to cavalry troop horses carrying heavy troopers and a full marching kit. The main body on the road had to keep checking to allow the screen to keep a sufficient covering distance in front, and even then there were times when the screen was rather closer to the main body than was perhaps safe. It was particularly so as the regiment approached the village, but the advance was apparently quite safe, because the country round was devoid of any cover than would shelter any considerable body of troops in ambush, and the advance point on the road would, of course, see that the village itself was clear before the regiment came to it.

But Bobby Steele, marching with the main body, noticed something that appeared to have escaped the attention of the Advance Point, and, having obtained permission to fall out, he pulled in to the side of the road and dismounted.

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Three minutes after he cantered up to his captain and saluted. "There's enemy cavalry about, sir," he said. "We've just passed a point where an outpost of four men have been on the look-out. And I believe the village there is full of the enemy."

The captain looked a little incredulous. "How do you know there was an outpost?" he said. "And what makes you think there's any one in the village?"

"I can explain it, sir," said Bobby, hurriedly. "But if you'll take my word for it meantime, I can show you a way to get in a good charge on those German cavalry, taking them by surprise. But it will have to be fixed quick, or they'll spot the move and counter it."

The captain was a good cavalryman, and wasted no more moments. "Come to the colonel," he said, and the two cantered to the head of the column, just as it commenced to drop down a gentle sloping valley that ran across the face of the long slope up which the road ran to the village. At the first dozen words from the captain the colonel turned in his saddle to Bobby. "What is it?" he said quickly.

"That village is full of troops, sir," said

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Bobby. "Men in the houses on this side are waiting to pour a volley or two into us when we're close enough, and then their cavalry will charge out on us while we're in confusion. If we move without hesitating, sir, we can swing off the road here in the dip where we're concealed from the village, across under cover of that wood, round the end of it, strike the other road, and come down on the village at the charge from the rear. They'll be formed up to charge this way, and when they spot our new direction we should be on them before they can re-form to meet us. But you must move quick, sir. If the column doesn't show over this next rise in a few minutes they'll suspect, and beat us."

Bobby spoke rapidly, but with such obvious confidence that the colonel was clearly impressed. He barely hesitated. "Anyhow," he said to the major who rode beside him, "it can do no harm to take the village from the other side instead of this." He turned to Bobby again. "Round by the wood?" he said. "But how do you know that isn't held by an ambuscade?"

"They'd be foolish to do that, sir," said Bobby, "it would spoil all their other plans. And, anyhow, it is not held. I can swear to

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that. I'm an Australian, sir, and too used to reading the bush signs not to be sure of all I'm telling you."

The colonel hesitated no longer. The column swung off the road sharp to the left, and struck at a quick trot along the shallow valley for the wood. Bobby, at the order of the colonel, rode beside him, a little in advance. "Can I go a little ahead, sir?" he said. "We might have to dismount and lead for fifty yards presently, to keep out of sight. If you'd follow my movements, sir——"

The colonel laughed. "It's your scheme," he said. "Go ahead, and we'll conform to your movements exactly."

Bobby spurred on, and the colonel turned to his major. "It's rather rum to be following one of my own troopers blind like this; but his captain vouches for him, and I believe the man has good grounds for all he's said."

The major chuckled. "Conform to the movements, sir," he said, and ducked flat over his horse's withers, as he had seen Bobby do a moment before.

"Pass the word," the colonel shouted back. "Do exactly as I do," and promptly ducked low over his charger's neck. "Glad there wasn't much of that," he said a minute later,

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as he followed Bobby's movement and sat up again. "It's not the most comfortable position for a fast trot."

"Canter, sir," said the major, chuckling again as he saw Bobby strike into a smart canter. They rode past the edge of the wood, swung round it, and dropped into another road that led from it towards the village. And as they emerged from the cover of the wood they saw a couple of mounted men ride at a hard gallop from some point well in rear of the village, towards it across their advancing front; and next moment another two men emerged from somewhere further round the flank, and "Tap, tap," went a couple of rifles from high up the slope, and "Tap, tap," again, while a couple of bullets *wheemed* overhead.

The colonel was clearly convinced that the village must be regarded as hostile, and snapped out a string of orders. One troop swung off the road, leaped from their horses, and strung out in position to cover the advance or a possible retreat with their fire. The others drove straight for the village. A little spasmodic shooting came from it as they swept closer, but it was too wild to be effective, and the regiment swung round a turn of the road

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and charged full tilt down into the village street.

The street was packed with mounted men, was seething with a wild confusion of shouted orders, clattering hoofs—men and horses struggling to reverse their front and pull round into position to meet this rush from their rear. But they were too late. The ranks which had been rear, and were now front, did, it is true, manage to come round into more or less ragged and confused line, and even attempt to meet the British charge by charging themselves. But with the slight slope against them, with their uneven front, without time or distance to acquire speed and momentum, they stood no possible chance. The British regiment poured down at a sweeping gallop, met them with crashing force, rode over and through them, and down on to the confused mass in their rear. They crashed home again on that with hardly a check to their stride and speed, carved and hacked into it, drove through, sweeping its broken fragments into side streets and lanes, and pushing its remnants bodily out of the village. Here there were a few furious minutes of cut and thrust, of close quarter hand-to-hand fighting, horses plunging and rearing and kicking, men

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slashing and stabbing, a wild mêlée of tossing arms and whistling, sweeping sword-cuts, clattering hoofs, shouts and oaths, jingling accoutrements, the harsh, jarring clash of steel meeting steel in guard and parry. Then the Germans began to throw down their weapons and hold up their hands; a few flung off their horses, scrambled through the low hedge off the road, and broke back over the fields towards the village. They were pursued and cut down if they did not surrender, while the remaining handful which wrenched clear, and fled at a gallop down the road were caught in a burst of fire from the covering party left near the wood, and, after a few were shot down, the remainder halted and huddled together, with hands held high in token of surrender. Meanwhile the main body of the British re-formed outside the village, charged back into it, coming under a momentary ill-aimed and spattering fire from its outskirts as they did so; burst in on an attempted rally of the broken regiment in the main street, rode it down relentlessly, and sabred it to the last resisting man. A troop dismounted and ran for the houses from which the rifle fire had come, but the Germans there made little or no attempt at further fight, and wanted no

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more than a demand for their surrender to bring them out with hands well up. The fight was over, with remarkably few casualties on the British side, with a German regiment of cavalry cut to pieces, completely accounted for in killed, wounded, and prisoners, with the exception of a bare handful which had escaped into the side streets from the first charge, had emerged from these into the open behind the village, and, scattering wide and riding hard, managed to escape.

That night the colonel sent for Bobby Steele and thanked him, and told him he was promoted sergeant. "And now I'd like you to tell us exactly what brought you to the conclusions you reached about this village being held, and so on. I may tell you that I don't often place myself and my regiment at the disposal of one of my men—and a newly joined man at that—on a bare word and a nod from him. But your captain told me he knew you for a first-class scout, and that I could trust you absolutely, so I did it, and am glad I did. But tell us your whole story now."

"Well, there's nothing much in it, sir," said Bobby modestly. "You see, I've lived most of my life out bush, hunting and trap-

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ping and shooting for sport or skins or tucker, and a man learns on that game to keep studying little things by sort of instinct, and figuring out what they mean. When we rode past some bushes on the road there, with the branches bent and the leaves stripped and broken, I suspicioned something, and fell out to have a closer look. I found that four mounted men, one of them an officer, I fancy, had been there about an hour, and that they'd mounted and gone off in a hurry as soon as they caught sight of us."

The colonel interrupted him. "That sounds simple," he said; "but we'd like the details. Why four men, and why an officer, and why an hour, and why when they caught sight of us?"

"There were marks of four horses tied to the bushes," explained Bobby, "and of four men having sat on the roadside and eaten a meal. Sausage skins and crumbs of black bread told me they'd fed and that they were Germans; and one of the four, having sat a bit apart from the others, and having eaten white bread and left a couple of gold-tipped Turkish cigarette ends, kind of indicated an officer. The amount of grass the horses had cropped looked like about an hour's halt,

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and the look of the grass where the men had been sitting said they'd been gone about ten minutes, which was about the time it would take us to come from where they could first see us, sitting where they were, to the time we got there. I can't just tell you why the grass looked like ten minutes. Crushed and flattened grass more or less rises again, and a man can get to learn from the look of it, and whether the ground is warm, and so on, how long it is since an animal quit his lie-down."

"Excellent," said the colonel. "That's real scout work. But now, how about the village being held and the plan you guessed about the Germans waiting to fire on us from the outskirts of the village, and then charge while we were in confusion? That's just what you told me, and it looks as if you'd hit it exactly. How?"

"The fire from the village didn't need much figuring, sir," said Bobby, with his eyes twinkling. "Half a dozen of the houses in the most commanding position had loopholes staring us straight in the face, if we looked for 'em."

The colonel nodded. "Only we didn't look," he said. "But that didn't tell you

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about the charge to follow it, or even that there were cavalry, and not infantry, in the village, or that the men behind the loopholes were not the whole force."

"There was some guessing in it, I admit," said Bobby. "But I'd common sense and some facts to back most of the guesses. I knew there were men in the village because I saw a lot of the chimneys smoking at an hour when the locals wouldn't be doing any cooking. The number of these smoking chimneys totted up more men by a deal than those loopholes could accommodate. It was unlikely they were infantry, because then all the men would have been in position for shooting, and there would have been more loopholes; and, besides, it's a fair bet that their cavalry are in advance of their infantry, and we'd meet them first. More than that, there were the four men on the roadside—a cavalry outpost; and our Advance Point on the road being allowed to come as close to the village as they were, spelt ambuscade. Probably they planned to let 'em right in to the village, and surround them and tell 'em to hands up, or maybe—as I'd have done it if I'd been them—have a rope stretched across the street to scoop 'em out of the saddle or trip up their

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horses. Being cavalry, and only having a few men in position to fire, I just figured, or guessed, if you like, that they'd make a charge."

"That's not guessing," said the colonel admiringly. "It's close and sound reasoning, and cleverer even than I expected. And, as you worked it out, I quite see your reasons for the sweep round and taking them in the rear. Just one thing more. Why were you so positive that wood was not held? If you were planning this ambuscade would you not have placed a flanking party in the wood to enfilade us and command our retirement down the road?"

"No," said Bobby promptly, "because our advance screen would have reached the wood well before we came within charging distance of the village, and they would have given the alarm. And I knew the Germans had reckoned the same way, because there were plenty of crows circling quietly round and alighting and sitting in the trees; and I saw a hare put up by our advance screen bolt straight for the wood and into it. The crows would have been a lot more fussy—if they'd stayed there at all—and the hare would have swerved or checked, or given some sign, even if it hadn't

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turned back, if men had been lining the edge of the wood."

"But why weren't the crows 'fussy' when we rode by the wood, and why didn't you count on the Germans telling by that we were circling round there?"

Bobby grinned. "The crows fussed all right, and I knew they would," he said. "They just rose up and screeched to those Germans that we were coming round. But the Germs didn't see 'em—as I knew they wouldn't. If I'd been trying to surprise a crowd of Australians in that village it would have been a different story. But Germans aren't bushmen."

"No," agreed the colonel; "and I'm afraid we're not, either. There's a good many of your points that the best of our scouts would have missed—did miss, in fact."

"I'd like to ask something," put in the major. "How did you know, without going over the ground, that we'd be hidden from the village, taking the line you suggested to the wood? And why did we have to duck flat on our horses that time?"

"There, again, I'm afraid I can't quite explain, sir," said Bobby. "It's partly having a good eye for country and the lie of

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the land, a cross between a little instinct and a lot of experience, I suppose. It was only the church steeple I doubted their being able to spot us from, and the slope covering us flattened out a little just where we ducked. Sitting upright I could see it, so of course it could see me; lying flat I just couldn't see the highest window. It was the same eye-for-country instinct that made me notice the lower crest of the slope at that point, and ask if I might go ahead to be sure we were covered there."

"Well, Steele," said the colonel heartily, "I'd cheerfully give my next step of promotion for that same eye-for-country instinct and the ability to use it, and that Sherlock-Holmesy fashion of finding facts and making deductions from them. You've given us all a lesson to-day on that sort of thing, and we have to thank you for the best bag the regiment has ever made. I'll see that it is reported in the right quarter, and, if you'd like it, I'll put in the strongest possible recommendation for a commission for you at the same time."

"I'm sure I thank you, Colonel," said Bobby casually, "but I'm not really keen on it. I get along well with the men, and find

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them a bonzer lot of good fellows. I doubt if I'd score as an officer. I'm too used to the Australian free-and-easy ways, and doubt if I could be stiff and stand-offish enough with the men to please you. I'd probably find myself poking borak at 'em, and chiacking with 'em, and calling 'em Billy and Jimmy and asking for a swig from their water-bottle. Not, mind you, that I think our officers too stiff and starchy for our men, though they might be for an Australian bunch. The men here know you and your ways and don't mind it—even prefer it, p'raps; and that's why, maybe, I wouldn't cut any ice as an officer with them. And, anyhow, I'm just as happy in the ranks, and don't mind a bit being made a sergeant."

Now this is hardly the fashion in which a British soldier accepts promotion to sergeant's rank, but the colonel, being an excellent judge of men, took it for what it was meant, and passed it with merely the faintest quiver of a smile on his lips.

"Very well," he said. "I'm glad you don't—er—mind. And, personally, I should not mind if I knew where to lay my hands on more sergeants as capable and wide-awake and resourceful as you've proved yourself to-day. They tell me you've got the nick-

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name of 'Open-Eye' in your troop, and I must say you deserve the name."

"I can tell you all right where to find more, sir," said Bobby Steele, grinning, "and a whole heap better'n me. You can import 'em by the hundred from Down Under. We breed 'em there."

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XIII

THE WINNERS

THIS tale might hardly be credible to those people who knew the trenches in the first winter of the war, the cruel strain on the men in them, the horrible conditions of life there, and the intolerable longing to escape them even for a day or an hour, if those same people who knew these things did not also know the manner of men who endured them. This story may help to illustrate both.

The 1st Bombardiers had had a very bad eight days on end in the front line, and had finished by having a portion of their trench captured from them on their last night in. This was in the first midwinter period before the trenches on both sides had hardened to that solidly defended line which afterwards made impossible any successful attack not backed with many guns and men, a period when the front lines were never inactive, when there was a constant bicker of rifle-fire,

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local attacks, attempts to rush a portion of trench here, an outpost there, when the rifle and gun fire never ceased day or night.

Because these attacks were so frequent, and because the Germans had such a greater weight of men and metal to fling on any selected point of our line, there were few battalions which could boast that they had never lost a trench or yielded ground without the battalion having been ordered to do so. The 1st Bombardiers could and did so boast, so that the losing of their trench on this last night hit them in a very tender spot. They fought savagely to hold it, even after their fire failed to hold the Germans off and they got a footing in the trench; and then when they were being overborne by sheer weight of numbers, they fought it out to the finish with butt and bayonet and, it was said, with bare fists. But a portion of the trench was taken and its occupants were killed; and although fierce counter-attacks were immediately launched, they were beaten back with heavy casualties.

The fighting, the attacks and counter-attacks, went on all night in a pandemonium of rifle and machine-gun fire, banging and crashing of bombs and grenades, yelling and

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shouting; the field-guns battering away their hardest in the background, and sending their shells rushing and shrieking close over the tangled mass of the fighters, who swayed and staggered to and fro on the wet ground, with the trench flares sizzling and blazing in vivid white light, and the bursting shells and grenades throwing a momentary hot orange-yellow glow over the inferno.

It ended at daylight as one might expect, with the captured portion still held by the heavily superior enemy forces brought up fresh for the attack against a weakened battalion of weary men who had been in action almost without a rest or break for months, had been eight days in the front line, were worn with strain, with cold and wet, with want of rest, were hardly fit to keep their feet from sheer physical fatigue.

Lieutenant Tommy Dodd, a youthful platoon commander, went along the remnant of his platoon next day and regarded his men with some anxiety. There could be no rest for any man of the battalion that day, because the Germans might try to push their advantage, and it was necessary to maintain a show of vigorous defence to prevent them,

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and because it was also wise, by constant firing and the occasional showing of bayonets and bobbing caps above the trench edge, to pretend an attack, and so hinder the Germans in the strengthening of their defences on the captured trench.

Tommy Dodd was anxious. His men looked so utterly done, so haggard and worn, so dead beat, that he began to wonder what would happen if another attack came, to wonder even if they would be able to hold out on the defensive all day. He went along them talking cheerfully, reminding them that they were going out that night for a rest, telling them that they must buck up and hang on until they were relieved. The men —tattered, mud-bedaubed, dirty scarecrows, sunk-eyed and stubble-chinned, rocking on their feet with fatigue—still answered cheerfully enough, and assured him they were all right; and they all wanted to know this—were they to counter-attack again and get their lost trench back.

Tommy Dodd was discussing this with his company commander a little later on. "They're pretty near the edge of done in," he said. "An' 'pon my soul, if they're asked to try again I dunno if they've got the

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strength to climb out of this trench. D'you think we'll try? "

" Lord knows! " said the captain, sucking ineffectually at his pipeful of wet tobacco. " I hope not, for the men's sake—although I hate leaving them that bit of our trench."

Tommy Dodd's sergeant came along and interrupted with a " Beg pardon, sir! "

" Yes, what is it? "

" The men have asked me to tell you, sir, that they'd like the officers to tell the C.O. we hope we can be allowed to stay in another night and take back our trench."

Tommy Dodd and the captain both looked a little staggered, but sent the sergeant off with a promise they'd pass on the request. When he had gone they laughed quietly.

" The beggars! " said Tommy Dodd admiringly.

" They're thinking of that brag of theirs about never losing a trench," said the captain. " Conceited devils! "

Tommy Dodd chuckled again.

" Any way, they're willing to pay for their conceit. Personally, I'm wondering if they can keep awake until night, much less go through another night with an attack thrown in."

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The request was duly passed to the C.O., and every other company had passed up the same wish. It was refused. They were being relieved by their 2nd Battalion at dusk; the arrangements were complete and could not be altered.

"So that finishes that," said Tommy Dodd to his sergeant. "But you can tell them I like their cheek!"

It didn't finish it. An hour later another request was passing up to the C.O. from all the men that, if they couldn't stay in another night, might they make an attack before dark, take back their trench, and have it to hand over to the relieving battalion. The answer this time was merely "No"; the colonel was sorry, but it couldn't be done.

"What's the idea?" said Tommy Dodd to his sergeant. "Do they really mean it? D'you think they're fit for another attack?"

"I think so, sir," said the sergeant. "They'd try, any way. They'll be glad enough to get out for a day or two's rest, but they don't like losing a trench."

That evening, just after dark, the 1st was relieved by the 2nd, and stumbled and staggered and waded and wallowed back by the short communication trenches, waist deep

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in water and mud in some parts, to the shell-battered village just behind the line, collected there in small groups, and trudged slowly through the rain across the sodden fields, with the bullets whimpering and whining overhead, until they reached the road and turned down it.

"Thank Heaven we're out of that," said Tommy Dodd to his captain, "and due for a couple of nights' sound sleep, anyhow."

"Another reprieve," said the captain. "Fairly safe to live through another few days, with any luck."

"Touching wood," said Tommy Dodd, thrusting out the stock of his rifle, which both solemnly touched. For, truly enough, a "reprieve," a postponing of the inevitable "killed or casualtied," was what a few days out of the trenches meant in those times—the times when the quoted "average life" throughout the whole Expeditionary Force was some seven months, which meant—deducting the Base and L. of C. men—somewhere round two or three months a man in the firing line could reasonably count on living. Yet the whole battalion had asked to stay "in" for another twenty-four hours, to be given the certainty of many killed and

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wounded, for the sake of recovering a lost trench and a lost tradition. You might think that request, remembering their condition, enough to save the credit and honour of the battalion. The men didn't.

So much is history, and, I suppose, on official record. What follows, for obvious reasons, is not.

The battalion reached their billets, a few miles back, after midnight, and Tommy Dodd was greatly concerned to find that his sergeant had not turned up on arrival there. He thought back to when and where he had last seen him on the road after coming out and crossing the fields, remembered the high bullet "screamers" and odd shells bursting wide, wondered and worried, until one of the men told him he had heard the sergeant complain of a sore foot and saw him drop out. Then next day it was reported throughout the Battalion that five men were missing from each platoon. The numerous explanations offered by others of this man and that being done up, and falling out on the march, seemed under the known circumstances quite plausible, although to be sure it was odd that there were exactly the same number missing from each of sixteen platoons.

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During the day about one-third of them straggled in to the billets, led by Tommy Dodd's sergeant. Each told the same tale of sore feet, done up, forced to fall out on the march. Beyond this the stories became curiously involved, and, under cross-examination, rather contradictory accounts of their doings developed, and an extraordinary tale of how they had lost their way and thought the best thing to do was to get back to the trench, where they knew they would find the 2nd Battalion. A few of them, it appeared, had "got mixed up" in the attack, and on further and individual cross-examination every man admitted to being one of the "few." And another "few" (about two-thirds of the lot, apparently) had been killed or wounded.

Here the C.O., suspecting much, but able or anxious, perhaps, to prove nothing, let the matter drop.

Then Tommy Dodd got hold of his sergeant and "put him through the hoop." The sergeant blandly persisted in his tale of sore feet, forced to fall out, lost way, and so on. Tommy Dodd tried another line. He knew the sergeant, and the sergeant knew him; giving his word that this was as man to man

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and in strict confidence—what was the truth, and the whole truth? Then he got the amazing story.

The men had resented not being allowed to get their trench back, and when they heard, through the signaller of the artillery Forward Observing Officer, that the 2nd Battalion were to take it after they had gone, they resented more than ever. Each platoon drew lots at last, and five men selected from each dropped out as they left the line, and crept back to the front trench. They had a sleep then, but when the attack was made the 1st Battalion men were first over and first into the trench, and had the biggest share in its retaking, with the sergeant, who had also drawn lots with his fellow-sergeants, leading them.

Then Tommy Dodd told the sergeant what he thought of him. He had trusted the sergeant to back him and maintain discipline, and here he had gone and allowed—no, worse, deliberately led—his men into relaxing discipline and breaking orders. The sergeant must know that not one of those men could be depended upon to take an order from him again. "Oh, yes, I *think* they will, sir!" said the sergeant grimly. And—and—and

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——he talked largely about crime and courts-martial, until the sergeant reminded him gently that anything said was in confidence, and that there was no crime in a man having sore feet and falling out on the march. Tommy Dodd changed the text, and went into another brief but bitter homily on disobedience of orders and failure of duty, with especial emphasis on trust in one's officers.

"That's what I'm most angry about," he concluded. "You should have told me about it right at the beginning."

"How could I, sir?" pleaded the sergeant. "If you think it was a crime——"

"Crime!" exploded Tommy Dodd. "Why should it be a crime for me more than for you? Isn't an officer allowed to have sore feet, or to fall out on the march? And there should have been at least one officer there to put it through properly. If I'd known in time——" He stopped abruptly, seeing the little twitch on the sergeant's lips. "Never mind that now," he said hastily. "Only I'm very angry about the whole thing—*very* angry!"

As the sergeant was going he stopped him with another question.

"I thought all the men were about dead

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beat and aching to get out to rest. Was it hard to find men willing to—er—draw lots? "

The sergeant smiled.

" Oh no, sir. They all drew. A straw to every man, and five short ones in each platoon."

" I see. The five short straws were the losers, and had to stay. Any difficulty in keeping them to the bargain? "

The sergeant looked puzzled a moment.

" Losers, sir? You've got it wrong, sir. You see, they all wanted to stay, so the five that drew the short straws had the right to. They were The Winners ! "

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XIV

HUNGER

AMONGST the men who landed with the first divisions in France there were a good many old soldiers with ribbons on their breasts of campaigns fought in all the odd corners of the world, but all these agreed for the first days of their arrival that this was about the pleasantest war they had ever met—an opinion that they reversed very thoroughly after the fighting end of the war had been running a short time.

But France had just been relieved of her dread that she was to be left to fight the war out alone, had made no secret of her belief that "If England joins us we win; if not, we are lost." They had heard by now that Great Britain had stood true to her pledged word, and these first troops to arrive were the outward and visible sign of the plighted word and the promisingly prompt action that followed it. We know the

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consequence, the way in which the khaki men were acclaimed and welcomed and rejoiced over; how food, fruit, flowers were thrust on them; how men, women, and children in France crowded the town streets to cheer them passing, waited in knots at the cross-roads and villages and cottages to show their joy.

They were pleasant days for the troops. France appeared to them as a happy land of sunshine and joyful people, a land overflowing with wine and cigarettes and white bread, inhabited by cheerful people with no lips that were not ready to smile on them, no hands that were not willing and eager to wait upon them. The troops were hailed and treated as conquerors, and naturally felt pleased to think that any foreigners should so readily know them for what in their hearts they felt serenely confident they were—the champions and saviours of all these charming people.

All this sort of thing was apt to be bad for discipline, and to lead men—even the old campaigners—into an easy belief that ordinary war precautions which had been ground into them as stern necessities in peace training were rather unnecessary. It is difficult, for

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instance, to make the men of an advanced scouting party desperately keen and cautious in advancing down a road or into a village when all their experiences of past miles of roads and villages have brought them to expect nothing more than another lot of cheering inhabitants, more freely offered food and drink. It was still more difficult to make men understand that food and water might become scarce or unprocurable at times, and that the rations served out to them might be all, under certain circumstances, that would stand between them and stark hunger.

Long-established discipline, constant training and teaching, went a long way to ward off these dangers, but even then there were some men who suffered from them. Private Billy Rudd and Second Lieutenant Inglis were cases in point, and you may be sure there were more like them when I tell you they belonged to a battalion and regiment that in an army of regulars of proved and tried discipline still stood out as noteworthy for it.

It was soon after the march up country began that this battalion was served out with three days' rations of bully beef and biscuits, and for the first full day no man had real

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need to touch these rations, because they were marching through populous country where in every town and village the inhabitants flocked to greet them, and the men had all they wanted of white bread and good food for, or even without, the asking.

Some of the men gave their first day's ration of bully and biscuits in exchange for this pleasanter food, and Private Billy Rudd went further and yielded to the clamour of the youngsters for " biskeet," and with cheerful generosity gave away, on the first day, the whole of the rations for the three days. They made an awkward parcel in a kit, and where could be the need of carrying so much useless weight when there was such a plenty of food to be had in every village and at every cottage on the road? Having no campaigning experience himself, Billy treated very lightly the warning of one or two older and more seasoned soldiers who told him he'd do better to hang on to his rations, and that he might need them before long.

It was hot and thirsty weather for marching, and of the many gifts offered on the way Billy chose more largely of the fruit than of any other food. At the end of the first day he had eaten a fair amount of bread and a

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great deal of fruit—and had given away the last scrap of his three days' rations.

Next day, which was the second their rations were supposed to cover, they came into country where there were not nearly so many generous inhabitants, where, although the troops did not then know it, they were approaching districts already touched by the enemy cavalry scouts or wild rumour of them, and the inhabitants had other things to think of than cheering and feeding our troops. A certain amount of food was still to be had, but Billy Rudd didn't have the luck to get any of it. During the afternoon he grew decidedly hungry, although not yet painfully so. He asked one of the other men, off-handedly enough, for any spare biscuit, and received in return a stiff talking to from an older soldier, who remarked pretty freely on men who expected others to do the carrying, for them to do the eating. Billy was not then hungry enough to take the lecture with the offered biscuit. "If you feel that way about a blanky biscuit," he declared offendedly, "you can go to somewhere and take your biscuit with you."

He still had a few apples in his pocket, and he ate those that evening before turning

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in. So he came to the end of the second rationed day, and was hungry enough to have been uneasy if he had not confidently expected more villagers and more free food next day. But there were none of these things next day, because they were moved up that night and came into action at daybreak. On the march up real hunger, painful gripping hunger, woke in Billy Rudd. A score of times he remarked on it with seeming lightness and jocularity, but really with serious intention. But his "I'm hungry enough to eat the hind leg o' a mule, hoof an' all," and "Strewth, Joe, but I'm blanky well famishin'," and "I wouldn't be a bit insulted if any one offered me a chunk o' bully," or even "I'll swap any man a packet o' woodbines for a biscuit," brought nothing but grunts or blank indifference.

Billy's recollection of that day's fighting is chiefly of an ever-present aching desire for food, and when you remember that this was his first time under fire and that there was rather hot fighting, it gives you some measure of the keenness of his hunger. But this was the third of the rationed days, and normally he could count on an issue of food next morning. He tried to soothe his pangs that

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night with this pleasant thought. He did not succeed very well. Whether it was the excitement of the day or the hunger is doubtful, but he certainly did not sleep even for the few hours when he had the chance. He dozed once or twice, and dreamed horrible dreams of animals biting and tearing at his inside, or of a gigantic German slowly twisting through his stomach a big bayonet which changed to a corkscrew. The dreaming was almost, but not quite, worse than the waking to the gnawing hunger pains, and the dreadful empty hollowness inside him.

Later in the night they were moved out and back on to the road, and began a march that to Billy Rudd was a nightmare of weakness and dizziness and faintness and hunger that by now had turned to positive pain. He was long past any sense of shame at begging, and he asked man after man for any scrap of food he had to spare. He got none, for the good reason that all the others, having finished their three rationed days, had also finished their rations, and a good many of them were already hungry enough themselves, having eaten their last day's rations on the previous morning and mid-day.

When the dawn came Billy Rudd was

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walking doubled up like a half-shut jack-knife, was grey in the face and tottery in the legs, and, as he felt himself, almost on the point of collapse.

This is where Inglis, his platoon commander, comes in. Inglis noticed his done-up looks, and spoke to him asking how he felt. Billy, with a sudden wild hope that Inglis might have some food to spare, told him bluntly that he was starving, that he was "near done in" for want of food. Inglis lectured him gravely, pointing out that even if he had finished his third day's ration on the third day, this was only early morning on the fourth, that there was nourishment enough in the three days' rations to carry him easily over a fourth, and that he must buck up and not get knocked up just because he imagined—as it could not be anything but imagination—that he was starving.

All this was rather a joke in a way, because while Inglis was talking he himself was simply ravening for food and his mouth watering at the thought of it. He also had been guilty of breaking orders, although not so flagrantly as Billy Rudd, and in fact unaware that he was doing so until the mischief was done. He, like the rest of the

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officers, had had the same three days' bully and biscuits as the men. The bully had lasted out the three days all right, but he had foolishly put all his biscuits in his haversack and pockets on the second day's march. He had the healthy appetite of a young lad, and had never really had to stint himself or go careful with food, and whenever he felt like it had simply pulled out a biscuit and eaten it. On the night of the second day he discovered to his amazement that he had no biscuits left. He said nothing about it, because, naturally, he was rather ashamed of himself, and would have hated his men to know the bad example of thriftless and careless ways he was setting them. So he went through the next day without food, and with a steadily growing and unpleasant feeling of hunger. By the time he delivered his lecture to Billy Rudd he was ravenous, and in a way just as anxious as Billy was to see the next ration issue. In fact, his case was almost worse than Billy's, because he not only had the physical pain (although this was not nearly as severe), but also had the dread that the lack of food might weaken him and force him to drop out on the line of march—a possibility on which he shut his

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teeth tight and swore to himself not to give in to while he could stir a limb.

The march went on with short halts every now and then, but the cottages that Billy strained his eyes on as they came near them, the villages they tramped through, no longer produced people offering food. Billy's hunger became a raging torment, that of Inglis a constant weakness-fearing worry coupled with violent stomach pains.

As they marched Billy Pudd began to grumble and complain bitterly. They had been issued three days' rations; this was the fourth day; where was this day's ration? Why were they being starved like this? Where was the blanky quarter-bloke; you could bet *he* wasn't going short of rations; and so on. The other men by now were mostly hungry enough too, and also began to grouse. Inglis heard this grousing, and after listening some time without remark spoke sharply to the grumblers, reminding them that this was the first day they were actually without rations and if they couldn't go for some hours of one day without, he was sorry for them and the battalion; and for heaven's sake try to behave like men and not like a kids' school short of its buns. And

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all the time he himself had a pain at his vitals like a gnawing wolf, and a lightheadedness that scared him stiff for his prospects of keeping up.

His talk silenced the others, but Billy Rudd's hunger was past the stage of being reasoned with.

Billy listened sullenly, but at last, goaded by his hunger and with a faint hope that Inglis might be able to get some food for him, he answered that he hadn't only gone some hours without food, that he'd had none that day, or all the day before, or——

Inglis broke out on him at that. Every man had been given three full days' rations; what the blazes did he mean by eating them in two; served him right if he was hungry; but three days' rations were three days' rations, and if they were eaten in less the good of them was inside the eater and would have to carry him on. Rudd ought to be ashamed of himself; and this was all the sympathy Rudd got.

At noon he was caught trying to drop out as they passed through a village where he thought he might beg some food. Inglis haled him back into the ranks, gave him another roasting, asked did he want to

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disgrace the whole battalion, threatened him with all sorts if he caught him dodging, and again reminded him his hunger served him jolly well right for his beastly greed. But all the same he spoke later to the Company Commander and tried to beg a scrap of food or chocolate for one of his fool men. But neither the Company Commander nor any others of the officers he asked had either food or chocolate.

Shortly after, the battalion was moved off the road, and after a tramp that was endless to Billy Rudd took up a position along the ditch of a big grass field. A few fields away some sort of root crop was growing, and Billy Rudd's soul filled with an aching desire for turnips—big round turnips with beautiful white insides, crisp and juicy and good to feel crunching between his teeth. His mouth watered at the bare thought. He gazed hungrily across the intervening fields at the wide spread of green tops, fidgeted and fretted, asked his sergeant if he might slip over and get a few turnips to chew, was refused sharply, grumbled and cursed under his breath, and returned to his gaze on the tops, his hungry desires, his mouth-watering thoughts of the immense numbers of turnips available, the

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look and feel and taste of them. He asked permission at last of Inglis, but Inglis knowing that if an odd man or two was allowed to go turnip-hunting, the whole platoon, and then perhaps the company, might scatter in similar search, refused permission to leave the ditch. Billy lay there for an hour longer, breaking out every now and then in curses on the quarter-bloke and the absence of rations due to them, thinking back over meals he had eaten in the past, and what he would eat now if he were in a restaurant and could order what he liked. He talked of these things and gloated aloud to his nearest companions about beef-steak and heaps of fried potatoes, suet puddings, apple dumplings, fat chops—all the most solid and satisfying foods he had ever known or heard of. The others after a little bade him shut up and not make them hungrier than ever, and Billy sank back to his turnip-gazing and ravenous longings. After another hour he could stand it no longer, told Inglis boldly that if he didn't get food he'd collapse, and that he hadn't really eaten for three days. Inglis imagined him exaggerating and told him so, and Billy protested and described the past four days in detail, including the giving

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away of his rations, dropping a bitter curse on the people who had asked for or accepted them, and on himself for being such an utter fool as to give them. It struck him that if he hadn't given them away he might have had them even now—three full days' bully and biscuits. He remembered the bulging haversack and thought of the handling of all that food in a lump, of grinding up and swallowing biscuit after biscuit, of ripping open a whole full tin of bully beef. The thought was too much for him, and his voice was trembling and his eyes wet when he finished; in another moment he would have broken down and wept like a child.

Inglis, wise beyond his years in the handling of men, and newly and painfully wise to what hunger meant, saw the state he was in, feared the mental collapse which he knew would be followed speedily by the bodily one, roused the trembler with the lash of his tongue and an angry lecture on his folly and the crime he had committed, not of leaving himself hungry, but of breaking orders, of shirking the carrying of rations, of risking letting the platoon and battalion down. Suppose every man had been a similar fool, suppose the rations didn't reach them that

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day, suppose . . . He used the lash of his reproaches the more severely because with it he was also punishing himself.

But at the end he said he'd see if permission could be given for a run over to the turnip-field, and Billy roused from a sullen hatred of this indifferent brute and a longing to hit him and tell him to shut up his lecture, to a passionate thankfulness and hope that he could secure the desired permission.

Inglis spoke to the Company Commander, and they debated seriously whether raw turnips in such case were good or bad food for a man, were staggered by the information from another officer that those things weren't turnips, that they were beets, were in greater difficulty than ever to know whether beets were good food, and before they could reach a decision about sending a few men over to fill ground-sheets and bring them back, received hurried and urgent orders to move.

They moved—away from the direction of Billy's turnips. Billy was furious, and when Inglis spoke to him, answered in a fashion that was little short of mutinous. Then Inglis let him have it, telling him all he had told before and a few other details in addition. He finished, and left Billy feeling nothing

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short of murderous, swept in alternating waves with self-pity and weakness that brought him near to weeping point, and blind anger against Inglis that made his mind reel, set him cursing the "full fed young brute . . . all very well for him . . . never hungry in his life . . . pockets stuffed full of biscuits and chocolate and all sorts, of course." . . . It was a pity Inglis couldn't have heard that last; he might have enjoyed the joke—afterwards.

They moved towards the road, but halted and took another position a mile from it. Billy passed the rest of the day in a queer haze, hearing all sorts of odd noises in his ears that had nothing to do with the rifle-fire and the distant spouts of brown earth and black smoke on the hill-crested horizon, seeing all kinds of wonderful colours sweeping in waves before his eyes, only rousing to any interest in life when he would suddenly remember that time was passing and that the delayed issue of rations *must* come soon.

At dusk the battalion occupied a ditch along the side of a wood and pickets were sent out. Billy Rudd went out with an N.C.O. and two other men to a point a few hundred yards in front.

Inglis was rather concerned over his going,

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took occasion to speak to the men, warning them of the seriousness of leaving their post on any pretext, said he knew they must be hungry, and when the rations came in he'd see that food was sent them at once.

The N.C.O. and the other two men assured him they were hungry enough, but nothing serious. They were all old soldiers and had known how to make their rations spin out, were quite all right until morning. Inglis gravely commended their forethought, stifling a wild desire to laugh and tell them how ravenous he was himself. He was just leaving them when a sudden thought struck him. He turned and demanded abruptly, "Have you all got your emergency rations with you?" But the moment the question was out he could have kicked himself for asking it. An "emergency ration" is issued to each man with the strictest of orders that it is to be used only in case of absolute last-minute emergency, and then only under the order of an officer. The order must be strictly enforced and heavily punished if it is broken, because if treated lightly, emergency rations would never be likely to arrive at the stage of a real emergency. And since this was a matter of discipline, and the battalion took

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such tremendous pride in its discipline, Inglis would have no choice but to report the matter if the ration had gone—and he knew the desperate state of Billy Rudd's hunger, the irresistible temptation it must have been for days past to a starving man to carry food untouched.

But the traditional discipline had stood even this fierce test. Billy Rudd displayed his emergency ration untouched.

Inglis lay down that night a little apart from his men in the ditch, and while he lay awake looking up at the stars and gripping his hands hard and tight on his belly, his batman crept quietly up to him.

"I've brought you a bit o' a stoo an' some bread, sir," he whispered, and Inglis jumped as if a knife had pricked him. His man had a mess-tin full of a steaming meat stew that gave out an odour—but it is idle to try to describe it or Inglis's sensations at sight and smell of it and the hunk of stale white loaf his batman handed him. It was some stuff got at a village a couple of days back, he explained, and saved up thinking they might need it later; hoped he wouldn't mind the bread being so hard; and he'd come back for the mess-tin in half an hour or so; and

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yes, he had some waiting for himself. He crept away, leaving Inglis sitting up on an elbow gloating over the hot stew.

Ten minutes later Inglis arrived at the picket, and after a cautious word with the N.C.O. roused Billy Rudd. "Here's some food," he said abruptly. "Easy now. Take your time over it, and don't spill any; the tin's brim full."

He waited there while Billy Rudd ate the stew and bread to the last drop and crumb, making him eat slowly and deliberately, and watching every mouthful. And at the finish he cut Billy's thanks short. "I can guess how hungry you were," he said. "And I'm glad you didn't touch your emergency ration." Then he slipped away, carrying the empty tin.

"That bloke o' mine must 'ave bin pretty peckish," his batman remarked half an hour after to two or three of his fellows. "When I got to 'im he'd finished every scrap o' the stoo an' the rooty, an' blow me if he wasn't runnin' his finger round the inside o' the tin, and then lickin' his finger clean. An' if you'd 'eard the way 'e said it was the most beautiful food 'e'd ever tasted, and the way he sort o' sighed when he asked an' I said there was no sign yet o' the ration carts——"

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XV

GRAND SLAM

SECOND-LIEUTENANT HAWSER, of the Hundred and Umpteenth Battery, Field Artillery, sat one night in the battery dug-out in charge of the guns. The dug-out, a mere pit some seven or eight feet deep, roofed over with a layer of sandbags made a rather uncomfortable habitation. Outside it rained steadily—as, indeed, it hardly ceased to do this midwinter of 1914–15—and a goodly share of the rain leaked through the roof and down the earth walls, while underfoot the combined trickles and the mud, carried in huge lumps on every pair of boots that slopped down the steps to the dug-out, churned into a sticky and foot-chilling floor.

Hawser sat at a rough plank-table, swathed in British warm, mackintosh, and muffler, busily engaged scribbling with a fountain-pen in a note-book; and a signaller and N.C.O., huddled on broken chairs, trying to read, with

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dirty magazines held close to the flickering light of a candle.

On the table, between Hawser and the signaller, a portable telephone instrument buzzed sharply, and the signaller laid down his magazine, lifted the mouthpiece, and helloed into it. "F.O.O.[1] to speak to you, sir," he said, and passed the 'phone over to Hawser.

"That you, Hawser?" said the F.O.O. "I say, the Inf. up here are getting a bit uneasy about some suspicious movements in front. Want me to pump a few rounds into 'em. I think I'd better."

"Right," returned Hawser; "better not be extravagant, though, or the Major'll be murdering you."

"It ought to run to half a dozen," said the F.O.O. "I've been specially economical all day trying to save up a full dose for that suspected sniper's house of theirs. I've used twenty-one——"

"Twenty-three, according to the tally here," interrupted Hawser, looking at a paper on the table.

"Well, twenty-three; and that leaves thirteen rounds out of the day's allowance. One minute—hold the wire."

[1] F.O.O. = Forward Observing Officer.

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Hawser held the wire, and presently the F.O.O. resumed: "The Inf. Colonel is begging for fire. I must give it 'em. Fire Number One on its registered lines."

At a word from Hawser the N.C.O. was up and out of the dug-out, picking up a megaphone as he jumped. "Number One gun—Fire!" bellowed the megaphone, and on the instant "bang" went the gun. Each gun, loaded and ready trained to fire on a "registered" spot in the German trenches, had a sentry standing by all night, ready to fire on the word being given. The shell was bursting over the target within five to ten seconds of the F.O.O. in the trenches calling for its fire.

"Number One fired," said Hawser into the 'phone.

"I think I'll spread Number Two and Three about a bit," said the F.O.O. "Down that communication trench of theirs ought to be a likely spot for a bag for one round. Let's see: Number Two, one degree more right, add fifty—Fire!"

Hawser repeated the order, the megaphone bellowed it on to the gun, and after a brief pause—"Number Two fired," remarked Hawser to the 'phone, as the dug-out walls trembled to the shock of the gun's discharge.

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Five rounds in all were fired, and then the Battery Commander 'phoned through from the mess, where he was at dinner. He spoke to Hawser and the F.O.O., and reminded the latter of the need for economy of rounds.

"Don't let those Inf. persuade you into any special fire-work display," he said. "They want all the support they can get, of course, and I'd be glad enough to give it 'em. But it's me that hangs for spending rounds, and not them. Don't forget that."

"Right, Major," said the F.O.O. "I think that'll do, for just now, anyway."

Hawser passed the word for the gunners to relay the guns on their "registered lines," and to turn in again to their dug-out shelters behind the battery, went up and had a look round, stood at the top of the steps for a moment, watching the flickering light of enemy gun-flashes jumping and flaming across the horizon, and listening to the crackle of the rifle fire, the occasional boom and bang of our field batteries' regular night-firing, and the easily distinguished rapid *bump-thud* of the much faster and heavier enemy artillery fire. Then he descended the steps to the dug-out, settled again to his table and guttering candle, picked up his note-book and read

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over his last paragraph, and resumed his writing.

In little over half an hour the Major 'phoned down from the mess, telling him not to wait to be relieved, but to come along to his dinner, that he had been in touch with the F.O.O., who reported all quiet, and that Hawser, therefore, was safe to leave the guns in charge of the Sergeant Major for an hour after dinner, stay up in the mess, and have a hand at bridge.

Hawser left the dug-out, and ploughed his way up through the mud and the streaming rain to the shell-smashed village, where the battery had a Mess and quarters for the officers and gunners not actually on duty with the guns. The Battery Mess was in a large room of one of the damaged houses. The building was a good deal knocked about by shell-fire, and the Mess-room decidedly lacking in comfort. It was cold and damp, despite a sulky and very smoky fire of wet wood in a fireplace which allowed the smoke to escape everywhere except up the chimney; a complicated cross-current of icy draughts played about the room, and a series of leaks dripped from various points of the ceiling on to the muddy floor and down the peeling

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walls. The furniture was a mixture of the dilapidated finery of upholstered chairs and couch which had belonged to the room, and less ornamental but more substantial plain wooden pieces imported from kitchens and neighbouring cottages.

It was here that Hawser found the other members of the mess, the Major, the Captain, and another subaltern just relieved from his turn as F.O.O., and it was here that after dinner the four gathered round a small table for the usual game of bridge.

Outside, the guns were still grumbling and rumbling sullenly, the rifle-fire popped and crackled in the line, and every now and then would sound the near or far wail and howl of a German shell coming over; the wind whistled and moaned about the broken building, and the rain beat savagely against the glassless boarded-up windows; inside, the candles guttered and smoked, and threw dancing shadows on the wall, the leaks dripped steadily, the chimney swirled out gusts of eye and nostril-stinging smoke. But the four cut for deal, and settled to their game as naturally and methodically as if they had been in a London club card-room or the anteroom of Woolwich Mess. Brutt, the relieved

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F.O.O., told, quite casually and conversationally, some of the details of the fighting in the trench he had seen that day, but trivial talk of this sort dropped as they settled seriously to the game.

They played for half an hour, hardly talking except of points of play between games; were huddled as close round the feeble fire as they could get the little table covered with a brown Army blanket; wearing British warms with coat collars turned up, holding the cards with stiff and chilly fingers, shivering and thumping heavy wet boots on the floor at intervals to restore circulation to their numbed feet, but making no remark on any of these things, taking them and the peculiar setting to their game as no more, apparently, than the usual and normal routine—which, actually, is just what it was.

It is true that this was a period when life was hazardous and casualties heavy, when shells and bullets were always frequent about the gun-line, when constant wet and cold and all-pervading mud combined to make existence an utter misery; but, as the Major said, when there was just all the more need to make the best of things and get what pleasure one could out of any spare time. And, since

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he was a bridge enthusiast, the Captain an expert, and Brutt a keen player, a rubber was a nightly institution whenever the Germans were peaceable enough to allow it.

This night the Major, in partnership with Brutt, sought revenge from Hawser and the Captain for a defeat inflicted on them on a previous occasion. The Captain was by far the best player there; but Hawser was so unskilled and, on the average, unlucky that he usually balanced the advantage, and the Captain had ragged the Major unmercifully for a couple of days past on he and Brutt being beaten so hopelessly. The first game played was a long and close one, and it ended with the Major and his partner beaten. Next game the Major was setting himself with tremendous seriousness to make good the loss when the 'phone across the room buzzed. The Captain went and answered it, took a report from the F.O.O. that all was quiet, chatted with him a minute, and told him how their game was going, and how he and Hawser were going to beat the Major and Brutt out of their boots, rang off, and came back to the game. "Raven says be sure to let him know how the rubber goes," he said. "Even if we have to buzz him out of bed."

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The Major was picking up his cards and sorting his hand with a gleam of triumph in his eye. "I'm glad it's quiet enough to let's finish this rubber," he said. "I just want to show you what a wholesome hammering we can give you when we really like." He broke off as the walls about them shook to the sudden crash of a battery salvo from some field-guns concealed amongst the houses across the road. "Wish the Teenth wouldn't do it," he said. "It's upsetting to the nerves. (My play, I think.) Why can't they let 'em off quietly, as Old Dash said?"

"Sounds like trouble up front again," said the Captain, listening. "Wind up again!" said the Major impatiently. "Get on with it. Raven will tell us if there is anything stirring." But next moment he also held his hand, and sat listening to the rapidly rising roar of heavy rifle-fire, the close-following thuds of enemy guns, the wail and rush of shells overhead. Across the road the battery crashed out again, paused, and began banging out a steady running battery-fire. The Captain jumped and ran to the 'phone, but before he could speak, all there heard the savage rush of high-velocity shells passing close overhead, the echoing crack and crash of the bursts over

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and about the village. A building was hit, and the shattering report of the shell's burst was followed by the clatter of cascading tiles or slates, the clink and tinkle of falling glass, the rattle and crash of a collapsing wall or roof. The four waited for the noise to die down, and then the Captain called up the F.O.O. "Raven says nothing special doing on his front," he said, after a brief talk. "I'll speak to him," said the Major, and crossed to the 'phone. The F.O.O., it appeared, reported heavy fire to right and left of him, but little in front, and no more than normal shells coming over. "I tell you," said the Major, returning to the table, "nothing but wind up again. And those Teenth fellows blazing off their salvoes scare the Boche into thinking we're stirring up trouble. Come along. Whose play is it?"

But the game was interrupted again two minutes later. The rifle and shell fire broke out with renewed violence, and an urgent call came from the F.O.O. The Major and Hawser vanished into the dark and wet at a run, the Major having carefully placed his cards face down on the table, and saying, as a last word, that they'd finish the game when he came back. The two floundered and splashed

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across the muddy field to the guns, with bullets whimpering and hissing about them and smacking into the wet ground. The guns were only about twelve hundred yards from the German front line, which lay beyond the crest of a low rise, so that any shots aimed high enough to miss our trench just skimmed the trench and swept down the slope. As they ran, the Major cursed pantingly the wet, the slippery mud, the dark, the bullets, and the Boche, who had interrupted a pleasant and peaceful evening's amusement. "Keep left a bit," he said. "I can't see our confounded guns, and I don't want to wander out across their front. Raven'll call for fire if—— Ah!"

Raven had called for fire. The darkness ahead of the two vanished in a blinding sheet of flame—another, another, another, as the guns fired in quick succession. The Major plunged down the dug-out steps and grabbed the 'phone.

This was the beginning of an exceedingly hot hour. Raven reported a terrific shell and rifle fire on our trenches, but no sign of German movement to attack. The Major slackened his rate of fire, and after a little, had a message from the brigade that a heavy German attack

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was in full swing some miles to the north, and that the position there was critical. If the front line there was pushed back it would almost certainly mean the spread of the attack to the south, and an attempt to turn positions there. "Cheerful," commented the Major, and passed the news on to the F.O.O. Presently the Captain arrived at the dug-out and reported that he was bringing up more ammunition, and the rumble of wheels and clink and jingle of harness told of the wagons' arrival a moment after. It was unfortunate that the Germans chose the following minutes to pelt the field of the battery's position with Pip-Squeak fire and a selection of heavier Four-twos or Five-nines. Even those shells which did not fall near the battery were still near enough to send showers of jagged fragments whistling and whirring over with plenty of power behind them to kill in the ugliest fashion. It was particularly trying for the drivers sitting perched high on the teams, waiting for their wagons to be unloaded, listening to the rising shriek of an approaching shell, the last heart-shaking rush and roar of its fall, the crash of its burst, the hiss and whistle and falling plop of its fragments. But the teams, men and horses alike, waited

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patiently and still in the wet darkness until each in turn got the word to move, and then each in turn pulled out as steadily and quietly as if on a peace drill parade, the drivers swaying forward with gentle knee-pressure and feel on the bit, the pairs taking the strain evenly and smoothly, and pulling out clean and clear. As the last teams went, several shells roared and crashed about the field, and on a megaphone-voice's yell from the dug-out steps for "Three rounds gun-fire," the battery burst out in a tempest of flame and thunder, in long shooting tongues of fire and leaping walls of vivid light, in ear-splitting bangs and howls of the departing shells. But, alike through the uproar and the silence which followed, while a voice from the darkness about the guns announced steadily "All guns fired, sir," the teams moved stolidly and quietly out and away in line at correctly spaced intervals.

The Major had another word from the brigade; this time of a partially successful German attack to the north and of our counter-attack developing, and close on this a message from the F.O.O. of an attack or threat of one on his front. The battery and other batteries near them set to work to smother the attack with sweeping shrapnel,

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and for ten minutes pelted the German trenches with fire.

The Major, switching his guns from one point to another as the Forward Officer required, groaned aloud over the expenditure of ammunition. "Nice *tamasha* there'll be over this. I dunno whether I'll be getting a 'Mention' for prompt assistance in repulsing heavy attack, or court-martialled and broke for exceeding the speed-limit. Six rounds per gun per day were the orders; and on that allowance I've spent about half the rounds I'll get issued me to finish this war on."

But the call from the infantry was urgent and insistent, and the guns were kept going. They were having a bad time in the trenches, according to the F.O.O., and needed all the support the guns could give.

"All very well," grumbled the Major; "but what about the support and the shells the Arsenal will give me. I don't grow 'em in my back garden, y'know."

But at last word came of the slackening of the pressure, and thankfully the Major slowed his fire; reduced it gradually as he heard the rifle-fire die away up front, and for the next hour did no more than fling over an odd round or two at intervals as a warning that the guns

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were ready and waiting to open if there was any call for them. At the end of the hour, Raven, the F.O.O., was able to report all quiet and normal again.

Quite late that night he was called up again by the Major. "That you, Raven? I'm down with the guns again. My turn to sleep in the dug-out here to-night. Give me a call if anything's stirring."

"It's all dead quiet here now, Major," said Raven. "Any news your end?"

"Didn't any of them ring you from the mess since I left?" asked the Major's voice. "No. Then you haven't heard the great news. Glorious victory! Complete rout of the enemy—horse, foot, and guns. Wholesale wipe out for them."

Even more than in his words, Raven heard in the triumphant ring of the voice how complete the victory had been. "That's great," he said enthusiastically. "I must tell them here. They'll be mighty glad to hear."

"What's that?" said the voice, with a slightly puzzled accent.

"They'll be glad to know of it here," repeated Raven. "We've been hearing all sorts of yarns about our line north being pushed in, counter-attack failed, and so on,

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and wondering if our flank would be turned, and we'd have to get up and get out."

"What on earth," demanded the voice, "are you talking about?"

It was Raven's turn to be puzzled. "It's their attack up north you're speaking about, isn't it?" he said. "We haven't heard of any other. Where's the victory?"

"Up north!" said the voice. "I'm not talking about the beastly Boche. I'm talking about our game to-night. Brutt and I won the rubber, hands down; beat 'em to bits. Game each, then game and rubber to us, with a no-trump grand slam to wind up with. Attack north—Germans——" Raven caught the note of contempt in the voice. "I'm not worrying about them; and you don't need to, either, my boy. We'll beat them in the long run and our own good time. They may score tricks in the first game, but we'll get game and rubber off them."

"And a grand slam to finish them with, Major," said Raven, laughing.

"There's none of us out here will ever be satisfied with less," said the voice emphatically. "None of us."

And Raven agreed cordially, as most of "us out here" did—and do.

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XVI

WHISKY AND SODA

"FIVE," said Greenie Buckler, as another shell burst down the line in a leaping rush of dirt and black smoke.

Next moment he jerked erect and jumped convulsively from where a fragment had hissed down and buried itself with a vicious slap in the mud a bare yard from where he had crouched. "Keep down there, Buckler; keep under cover," called a sergeant, and Buckler resumed his crouching position and spluttered angry curses. "Under cover—where's the dash cover from stuff that slaps straight down out o' the sky? Dash take——"

A gust of bullets whewed and whimpered and hissed overhead, and another lot pattered and thudded into the earth of the low parapet. A group of light shells snarled over and burst in a series of rending cracks, and the group in the trench bottom crouched lower and glanced up apprehensively. A sharp cry

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followed close on the cracks, and some of the men stirred restlessly and muttered low oaths. "Some one else got it," said one, "wonder who this time?" Another grunted, "Wonder who next?" and the group fell silent again. "Four together that time," remarked Buckler. "But I've forgotten what I counted to before them."

"Shut up and quit countin' the cussed things," he was told. "There's too many of 'em for comfort, an' that's quite enough to know."

"Want to know what they average out a minute," said Greenie Buckler. "I've a notion this is about as hot a fire as this ol' war has raised, and I want to be able to quote figures at 'em when I come to argue it."

"Yes—when?" came the retort. "But it looks like the devil will be the only one you'll have a chance to argue with before night."

The battalion was having a bad time, and were taking it the harder because it was their first turn in the trenches, because they were suffering rather heavy casualties, and because they had nothing to do, had nothing they could do, except squat in the mud of the shallow and broken-down trenches, and take

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the punishment that was coming to them. It was dismal weather, with the ground a soaking quagmire and a cold rain sleeting steadily down. The men's coats and clothes were soaked and sodden to the skin, and clothes, hands and faces were fouled with the chilly, slimy, clammy mud which was everywhere round and under them and clung to everything it touched. The only landscape visible to any eyes that looked outside the trench was a wet expanse of the same sodden earth and mud, a few shattered stumps of trees standing up gaunt and forlorn, a horizon curtained off by a grey drizzle of rain—all most horribly dreary and depressing and unpleasant. Nothing alive could be seen; nothing moved except the thick black smoke of fresh shell bursts, the slow uncoiling, dirty clouds of their dispersing.

The scene and surroundings alone might well have depressed the spirits of the best and bravest; and when you add in the rush and crash of the shells, the whistle of bullets, and—worst of all—the occasional sight of a casualty from shell-fire, you cannot wonder that the men were in no cheerful mood.

The same battalion—which meantime we may call "The Greenhorns"—came after-

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wards to prove itself one of the best and toughest fighting lots in France; but—and this is no discredit to them, and they take no shame now in owning to it—they were going through about the worst of the experiences they were to know, and were not feeling good about it. They were picked men, one of the first lots to come in to the relief of the dwindling "Contemptible Little Army," and every man of them had asked nothing better than to get into action, had been desperately keen and anxious to show what they were made of, and just how good the battalion was.

But this very keenness has its dangerous side, as plenty of old soldiers will tell you, especially in a lot that have not been tried out in action, that have not "found themselves." They do well to be proud of a reputation, but not if they get to worry about it, because from worrying they may get to being nervous about it—and the front line is no place for any sort of nervousness. It is worse with new and untried men because a hot action is so often more horrible than imagination could paint, and men are inclined to think this particular shell or rifle-fire or attack is heavier than anything men have

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endured, to pass on to thinking it is worse than men can endure, and—last and most dangerous stage of all—come to failing to endure and flinching from the trial. Greenie Buckler was counting the falling shells with just that idea in mind of proving some day that, as he said, "They say this is the worst war on record, an' I fancy we're in about the worst bit of it as ever, ever was."

The battalion had been in for two full days and nights and had suffered with great fortitude the gruelling process of being under a fairly heavy long-range shell-fire, losing a number of men, and having their shallow trenches badly knocked about. But on this, the third day, the shelling had risen to an intensive bombardment, and in addition a heavy rifle and machine-gun fire had swept the ground in steady streams.

When this rifle-fire first began it appeared a sound reasoning to our men that if the Germans looked over their parapet to fire their heads must be presenting a target to be shot at; and greatly cheered by the change from their deadly inactivity they lined their parapets and opened a rapid fire. But the Germans had the greater number of rifles and a still greater weight of machine-guns,

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and in response to our fire there came from the German trenches a steadily rising, full-bodied roar of rifle-fire and a sluicing torrent of bullets that swept our parapets from every possible angle, while the rate of fire from the enemy guns also increased and their high explosives burst in an unceasing storm. At the end of half an hour of this duelling we had so many casualties—most of them killed outright with clean shots through the head—and were so evidently getting the worst of it, that orders were passed along to ease off and for the men to keep down and under cover.

This again, the feeling that they had been fairly beaten in the duel, was not the best feeling for the men to have to sit down and digest through another bout of active shelling, and spirits went down and down, and gloomy prophecies began to pass on the chances of any success attending a move part of the battalion was due to make before dark. Out on their right front and about a hundred and fifty yards away, there was a slight rise in the ground from which the Germans were able to bring a half-enfilade fire to bear on part of our line. The rise was to be captured and our line pushed forward to take it in, and the right half of the battalion

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was to make attempt the while the other half made a demonstration of attacking the trenches opposite them. At first it had not been supposed that the trenches along the rise were heavily held—in fact, official word had been passed round to that effect.

The battalion, and the right half especially, began to hold a very different opinion on the matter after that rifle duel and the weight of fire that came from the opposition. They were ready and willing enough to make the attempt, and were in no sense afraid to die; but they began to feel certain that the attempt meant nothing but death, that none of them could live to come through such a fire and reach the enemy trench. And this, despite any amount of determination, is no healthy spirit for men to take with them into an attack.

The C.O. made a tour of some of his trenches during the afternoon, and spoke to odd officers and N.C.O.'s and men and tried to gauge their feelings and the situation. He was far from feeling easy at the result, and he went back to the Signals dug-out and had a 'phone talk with H.Q. behind—speaking in French to keep his talk private from the signallers. Like his men he was perfectly

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willing and eager to have the chance to show what they could do and make the little forward move; but thought it no more than wise to warn H.Q. of his opinion that the attack might not live to reach the enemy trench, and so on. In reply he was told to go ahead with the programme, but was promised some reinforcements to make up for the losses he had suffered. The reinforcements could only be few, but they would be good.

This remark on reinforcements—without any word of their fewness—was allowed to filter out and round the men, and they began to feel a shade more hopeful. But very shortly after, there came such a sudden and tremendous increase in the enemy fire that the hopefulness began to die down again. The rush and crash of the high explosives came faster and faster, although this time the most of them appeared to be falling well behind. The rifle and machine-gun fire rose again too, and the bullets streamed overhead and rapped thudding along the parapets, until the men, crouched low and listening to the fiendish uproar, began to speculate dismally again on the chances of any one remaining alive a moment after they left the cover of

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the trench and faced the storm in the open. A whisper began to go round that the Germans must have heard—those cursed spies again—the attack was coming off and were trying to break it before it began. And what sort of fire must they expect to meet when the attack began, if before a man showed, it was as hot as this? "This," the hiss and whisk and thud of bullets, the howl and vibrant rush of the passing shells, the quivering of the ground under the impact of their fall, the riving cracks of the shrapnels' burst overhead, the deep tearing crashes and storm of flying fragments from the ground-bursts, all the clamour of battle that made up the "this" gave no shade of comfort in the answer to their question. They'd made the attempt all right, of course—but it was hard luck—not a chance to show the sort of stuff they were, or let the folks back home hear how they could make a charge and clear a position—hard luck, but at least they'd show how the battalion could die, to the last man if need be, in a desperate charge.

Then, when the feelings of the Greenhorns were at their lowest, when they were coming to the dangerous verge of wondering was it worth while for them to be thrown away

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uselessly—quite uselessly, since it was plain none could survive that fire in the open and the rise would remain untaken—the reinforcements appeared.

The first sight of them filled the tired men in the trenches with an amazement that changed rapidly to open wrath and disgust. For the reinforcements were advancing across the open in a long, widely-spaced line at a steady walk. It was evident that the Germans, too, had seen them, for the shells began to pitch further back and flame and crash down along the advancing line, the rifle-fire swelled to a roaring storm. The battalion watched with straining eyes to see the advancing line swept out of existence, be cut down to the last man in the first hundred yards. It was suicide, it was crazy folly, it was this, that and the other, to sacrifice men so. Couldn't their officers have seen it was hopeless to come over the open, walking, upright, under fire of this sort. And bitter remarks began to pass of unpleasant things they had heard from time to time about the stupidity, the rashness, the thickheaded carelessness of life shown by fool officers.

But the line came on, with maddening slowness, but with the most astonishing

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steadiness. A group of shells would fall in winking fire and spurting smoke along the line; here and there odd men stumbled and fell and lay still, or staggered up and into place and on again. Another string of shells—heavy ones this time—crashed down and a half of the line vanished behind the curtain of rolling black smoke; but as the smoke thinned and drifted aside dim figures came in sight again, still in line and still advancing. The men in the trenches gasped and held their breath and waited tense with straining eyes and thumping hearts to see the end, the moment when the line would thin out and die away under the crashing shells and the drumming bullets that hailed down flinging spurts of mud and dirt from the ground amongst the very feet of the moving men. One hundred yards they had thought was the limit the line could cover before they were cut down; and seeing the tornado of fire most there began to think the hundred yards an overestimate.

But the line covered the hundred yards, two hundred, three, four . . . and began to drop and clamber and jump unhastily down into the cover of the support trench. There were scattered figures dotting the ground

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behind them, there were a few crawling back, already there were stretcher-bearers doubling out to salve the wounded; but the line had reached cover, still more or less as a line, decidedly and most miraculously without being annihilated.

"By God!" said Greenie Buckler. "By God!"

"What lot are they?" asked another man. "Must be the Guards, or some o' the crack regiments."

"Not them," said Greenie. "They're the Roughshire Stuffs or the Stuffshire Buffs, or some other crowd I dunno I ever heard the name of. Just one of the ordinary common county regiments o' the line—one o' the old Regular regiments."

"Well, after this," said the other, "I'm ready an' willin' to believe any sort o' fancy fairy-tale yarn they like to tell me o' the old Regulars. I take off my hat to 'em."

They were all prepared to lavish compliments and comments of amazement on the newcomers when presently they began to filter up by the short communication trench to the front line, but the newcomers received these with such an air of surprise that the comments died away.

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" That," said one of the Regulars. " Pretty hot, but nothing to shout about. We've met a lot worse'n that," and they dismissed the matter at that.

Not only so but they appeared to take the situation—which the Greenhorns still considered horribly bad—as a mere matter of course, as something so much the normal as to be worth no special remark. They began to go calmly about the business of settling in and making themselves as comfortable (if the word may be permitted under such circumstances) as possible, scooping out little niches here and there and rigging up waterproof ground-sheet roofs to them, taking off overcoats and wringing the water out, with one man to the shoulders and another to the skirts, and putting them on again, even, in the case of one little group producing a handful of dry sticks from somewhere about their packs, lighting a little fire, and boiling water to make tea.

The Greenhorns regarded these proceedings with round-eyed wonder, and for very shame's sake were forced to move and sit about like these others, instead of crouching low and hugging the parapet as they had been doing.

" You're pretty snug in here," said one of

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the tea-makers, looking up at Greenie Buckler. "Fine deep trenches an' good cover. Feels safe as the Bank."

This was a new and strange opinion on their trenches to the Greenhorns. They had been thinking them most unsatisfactory trenches, wofully lacking in any good points, shallow, tumbled, brokendown and everything else a trench ought not to be.

"They're a bit smashed up," said Greenie hesitatingly. "We've been shelled—er—rather badly the last day or two."

"They're still bloomin' trenches anyway," said a little Cockney emphatically. "You want to lie hout in the bloomin' hopen for a day under a heap worse fire than this, an' you'd think you was bloomin' lucky to 'ave trenches at all—much less good 'uns like this."

Conversations of a similar sort were going on up and down the line, the Greenhorns began to discover that affairs were not nearly as desperate as they had supposed, that their casualties had been comparatively light, that their position was a strong and easily defendable one, and that the expected advance on the rise must end in a no-less-expected capture of it.

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The coping stone to this cheerful opinion was put on by the little Cockney. Several remarks had been made by the Greenhorns round him about the position that was to be attacked, the huge number of Germans opposite, and, feeling gently for an expert opinion, on the chances of successfully facing the enemy fire.

"Where is this bloomin' position," asked the Cockney at last, and when a Greenhorn without looking out of the trench pointed the direction, the Cockney stood up and looked out at it. "You got a good position 'ere, hanyway," he remarked, hitching himself a little higher to look out. "Plenty o' wire hout"—there were about six straggling strands—"an' a fine, hopen glassy [1] for 'em to cross if they want to try. Not that they're likely to try. We could shoot 'em into cat's-meat 'fore they come 'arf way."

"Better keep down a bit," said Greenie gently, as half a dozen bullets hissed close over. "Their trenches over there are stiff wi' rifles, an' if the Germans——"

The Cockney interrupted. "Where are these bloomin' Germs?" he demanded irritably. "I ain't 'ardly 'eard of nuffink helse

[1] Glacis.

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but these bloomin' crowds o' Germs since we come in 'ere. Well, where are they? "

"If you don't see 'em you'll be hearin' from 'em presently," said Greenie Buckler grimly, "if you keep on showin' as much of yourself as that. We lost a few this morning that were showin' less'n half a head over the parapet."

"Hall right," said the Cockney scornfully. "Let's see if they're such bloomin' crack shots an' if there's so bloomin' many of 'em." And without more ado he scrambled up out of the trench and deliberately stood, a clear man-high target, on top of the parapet. Bullets began to whip past in rapidly increasing numbers, and Buckler and the Greenhorns gaped up at him waiting every instant to see him fall back riddled like a sieve.

"Well," said the Cockney, "where are all these bloomin' Hallymands?" He walked half a dozen paces along the parapet and back again. "Where are hall these bloomin' crack shots?"

His fellows regarded him with mild interest. "Better hop down outer that," remarked one casually. "If the sergeant dekkos[1] you, you'll be for it."

[1] Sees.

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The Cockney condescended to take this advice, and clambered down leisurely with the bullets still humming and spitting angrily about his ears. "Rotten shots. Rotten bloomin' shots."

"Isn't that a bit crazy?" said Greenie to one of the other Regulars. "Don't you fellows have risks enough without going looking for trouble?"

The Regular grinned at him. "Not as crazy as it looks," he said. "They are pretty rotten shots, y' know."

"But they got a whole bunch of ours showing no more'n half a head," said Greenie.

"Chance shots," said the Regular. "But him standing up there a fair target they'd aim deliberate at 'im. I s'pose that's mostly what gives us a chance advancin' against 'em over the open. They see us plain and they picks targets to aim at—an' misses as a rule. Now when *we* get a chance o' that sort—ar-r-r!"

Here again was a new and most cheering version of the business of advancing over the open under fire. The Greenhorns up and down the trench heard plenty of the same sort of talk, and most of them had seen or heard of the little Cockney's exploit. The

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opinion grew and strengthened that this job of taking the rise was a mere trifle, that they had been needlessly worried about their dangers, that after all they'd be able to show how they could take a trench and use a bayonet.

They were to make the attack and the reinforcements stay in support. The Regulars were mildly disappointed but properly philosophic over this arrangement. They'd never had a fair go with the bayonet, they explained, been in a dozen big battles, but mostly had nothing to do but blaze into the brown of 'em—fair butchery! And what was the good of all the years of training and bayonet exercise they'd practised if they were never to do more than shoot Germans into ha'penny numbers at anything over two hundred yards? And besides when you took a trench there was always all sort of loot—haversacks with tasty snacks in 'em, and helmets, and maybe a few medals and wrist watches. The Greenhorns might count themselves in luck. And before they began their advance the Greenhorns, instead of being desperately keyed up to certain and sudden death, actually began to agree they were in luck and to feel quite complacent about it.

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The attack was made some minutes before the appointed time, because a sudden downpour of rain gave a chance of getting out of the trench and part of the way across before they were discovered through the grey curtain of the falling torrents. They went forward in better heart and with more confidence than they would have believed possible an hour or two before. Greenie Buckler, indeed, to his own secret amazement when he came to think it over after, found himself laughing more than half the way over. The little Cockney had climbed out with them, and Greenie was amused to see the way he crouched and ducked and slunk furtively forward with an apprehensive eye cast constantly behind him. Greenie was tickled at first to think this was the man who had been so contemptuous of bullets a little before, and now apparently was in mortal terror of them. But he was even more amused presently to find that what the Cockney was so afraid of was being spotted by his officer or sergeant and called back because he had no right to be there. Greenie shouted at him to ask why he had come along, and the Cockney explained that he "was after one o' them autermatic pistols their

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hofficers carry—promised to get one for a pal at 'ome an' never 'ad a chance before."

The attack was successful and the rise was taken. It was not such a tame affair after all, and the Greenhorns had a good many casualties in the crossing, but much more than levelled the score when they got in with the bayonet. They walked over in lines as level and at a pace as steady as they could make—remembering all the time that line they had watched come through the tornado to them, and anxious to show the Regulars back there that they could follow a good example when it was set them. They took their trench and held it against a sharp counter-attack or two, linked up their new trench with the old, and settled in with the cheering conviction that no Germans on earth could take it from them.

They were relieved next day, and they were behind the lines when their friends the Regulars came out a few days after. By now they had come to realise all that this handful of men had meant to them, and they turned out of the cellars of the ruined village where they were billeted and lined the rubbish-strewn street and gave the Regulars three cheers *and* a tiger, as they tramped stolidly through with a mouth organ piping at their head.

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"G'blimey," said the little Cockney. "Wot's hall the tamasha [1] about?"

"Gawd knows," said the man next him. "Pleased to see us again, I s'pose—an' remindin' us they was pleaseder to see us t'other day."

"Strewth! Fat lot o' good we did 'em," said the Cockney. "Just sat in comfortable trenches an' watched them take theirs—'cep' me that got nothink for my pains but a 'ole in me toonic an' a tellin' off from the sergeant. Fat lot o' good we did for 'em."

But therein he was very wrong. They did more than they knew. The Greenhorns knew so by now and Greenie Buckler spoke for most in what he said of them.

"God knows what we'd ha' done if they hadn't come in and showed us the worst is only as bad as you think it is. I know they did me good."

"Me too," said another. "They was like a good long drink to a bone-dry man."

"They were more," said Greenie. "Plain water or straight soda is a good enough drink when you're dry; but, being the old hand Regulars, they were more; they were just the drop o' whisky in the soda."

[1] Performance.

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XVII

A GRATEFUL COUNTRY

To Second-Lieutenant Carruthers, squatting on an armful of wet straw in a wetter dug-out, came his sergeant to remind him of the time. Carruthers crawled out, turned up the collar of his mackintosh against the drizzling rain, and started off on his round of the trench. Some desultory rifle-fire was going on, the bullets were flying over, and every now and again a German "Whizz-bang" rushed in and burst over the trenches. Carruthers and his sergeant halted and crouched low when any of these came near, but paid no heed beyond this. The sentries were visited and the rounds completed and Carruthers floundered and splashed back to his apology for a "dug-out."

The trenches were in that portion of the line which ran along by the Festubert-Bois du Biez front, and any one who knew these parts in the spring of '15 will require no

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reminding of them; their memory will stick. To those who did not know them a brief explanation may help to an understanding of their unpleasant situation.

The German trenches ran along the lower edge of the slopes, and our trenches were right at the foot, and so caught all the water which drained off the hill and was pumped from the German trenches. The ground in our lines was so low-lying that if you dug more than a foot deep you came to solid water, and as a result there were no real trenches, but only a shallow scoop dug out of the ground and slopping in liquid mud and water, and breastworks of sand-bag parapets. For the same reason there were no proper dug-outs, but, instead, the men sheltered in little holes recessed in the parapets or shelters built up of sand-bag walls.

Carruthers's dug-out was of this type, a little kennel place with walls one sand-bag thick and covered with a piece of corrugated iron and a splintered door heaped with about six inches deep of earth. The whole erection was about as vulnerable to the lightest possible shell as a cardboard house would have been, and, what was equally discomforting,

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it was also as vulnerable as a sponge to the steady rain.

The rifle-fire from the German lines brisked up just as Carruthers approached his shelter, and he stopped for a moment, stood up on the low fire-step and hoisted his periscope to have a look out. He had barely got it in position to see when a bullet came along, hit it fairly, and wrecked it. Carruthers swore lustily, as he examined the damage, and then was forced to reconnoitre as carefully as might be through one of the loopholes. He could not see well from here, so ventured his head cautiously above the parapet. Evidently a sniper was watching that particular portion of parapet, and Carruthers's head was hardly well in sight before he felt an alarming whack, felt the cold air on his bare head, and found his cap spinning off into the mud behind him. One of the men rescued it and handed it back, and Carruthers's language broke out afresh when he found that the bullet had hit his badge, had driven on, taking the badge with it, and ripped the top of the cap to ribbons. By now the fire was easing off again, and Carruthers abandoned further attempts to look out, and wallowed his way back to his shelter. It was falling

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dusk, and so quite dark inside, and he produced an electric torch, found a couple of inches of candle, placed it in position in a niche of the wall and lit it. Then he squatted again on the straw, drew his British warm closer about him, wrapped a damp blanket round his legs, and began to pore over the figures of a bank pass-book.

He was still engaged on this when a voice called outside, and Carruthers looked up and shouted to come in, adding, as the newcomer thrust aside the ground-sheet curtain to the door, ducked down and crawled in, to wipe his feet on the mat and give his cap to the footman. He also apologised for the warmth of the room and recommended an armchair. The other disposed himself on the edge of the straw bundle as Carruthers edged over to make room, and grunted, "You're in a dash merry mood, Carrie," he remarked: "quite in tone with your cheerful surroundings."

"Quite," said Carruthers. "You've said it exactly, Roberto. I may add that my literature is also in strict accordance with the merry mood and surroundings." And he displayed the bank-book. "Do you understand anything of these matters of high

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finance, Roberto? If so, perhaps you'll expound to me."

"I know a little of bank-books," said Roberto. "And I'm an expert on all business of Overdrawn Accounts, having had much experience. What's up?"

"What worries me," said Carruthers, "is that this war may stop within a year or so, and in that case I won't have drawn enough pay to clear off the debts I've incurred in His Majesty's service. They gave me, I think, twenty pounds to provide myself with uniform and kit. It cost me all that to buy a revolver, sword and field-glasses; leaving such items as tailor's, bootmaker's, shirtmaker's and other bills to come out of my pay. Said pay appears to be about five bob a day, and it cost me more than that for my mess bill while I was in training at home."

Roberto looked at him curiously. "Haven't you any private means?" he asked. "I don't want to be inquisitive, but if you haven't, what on earth possessed you to take a commission? I don't see how you expected to do on your pay and allowances."

"I dunno," said Carruthers gloomily. "I took a commission because I thought it was a right and proper thing to do, and because

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some fathead told me I could get along on my pay on active service."

"So you can—just about," agreed Roberto. "Once you've worked off the dead horse of outfit and initial exes. But you could never have done if you'd been kept on Home Service, with Messing and all the other charges. So you're in luck to be out here."

Carruthers grunted. "You call it luck!" he said; and looked round the dismal shelter, the guttering candle, the dripping roof, and the churned mud, wrinkling his nose with disgust. There came the swoosh and crash of a light shell close outside and a spattering of dirt and fragments on the scanty roof. "In luck," repeated Carruthers when the noise had died away. "Look here," he added, exhibiting his torn cap. "Another bit of luck. It'll cost me a guinea for a new cap, I s'pose, and the robbers will charge me three and six is it, or five and six, for two penn'orth of gun-metal stamped out in the shape of a cap badge."

"Now, now, Carrie," said Roberto soothingly. "How do you expect the cap-makers and badge-makers to live if they can't make a few hundred per cent. profit."

"And here again," said Carruthers, "I'll

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have to stump up another quid and send home for a new periscope. I want to know why can't the Army provide me with the tools of my trade at least? The Artillery don't have to pay for their field-guns, do they?"

"Ah!" said Roberto, "that's an interesting point. I don't think so, but I can't be quite sure. I don't see why not, since we have to pay for our revolvers and the swords we are forced to buy and then send home. But why if you feel thus about the whole matter, my friend, why did you rush to take a temporary commission?"

"Because I was a fool, I suppose," said Carruthers huffily, "and happened to have a hundred or two in the bank to see me started. And incidentally because I thought it was every fit man's duty to join up, and that, having been through South Africa as a Volunteer, my experience might be more useful as an officer."

"Bless me," said Roberto admiringly. "A real live patriot. Duty—more useful! Well, well, well!"

"What are you gassing about?" said Carruthers. "You took a commission yourself."

"True," agreed Roberto; "but that was before there was a war. I took it because I

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was keen on soldiering and didn't mind paying for the privilege of being an officer —as, of course, every officer in the Regular Army has always been expected to do."

"Well, I call it dash rot," said Carruthers. "I don't specially want to make money out of the beastly game, but I do think the country might give me enough to pay my necessary outfitting, and a wage equal to a navvy."

"They do say that the outfit allowance has been, or is to be, increased," said Roberto. "Another twenty pounds or so, which will bring the allowance up to a third, or even a half, of what your kit cost you. You've no idea how extraordinarily generous that is of the Government. Never heard of such a thing in the old days, although perhaps it is that the Army finds a shortage of the particular brand of fool we were, and can't rope in men enough willing or able to pay heavily for the honour of coming out here to wallow in the mud and get shot or bayoneted. But I gather from the papers there is still a big crowd of similar fools chucking their jobs and joining up to get shot at a shilling a day. It's a queer world, Carrie—as I believe has been remarked before."

"Queer!" said Carruthers, and paused on

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the word, listening to the rapidly increasing sound of rifle-fire again. "Sounds like breezing up for another row," he went on. "S'pose we'd better turn out again." He rose from his squatting position, bumped his head badly on the low roof and crawled hastily out after Roberto.

They were back again in about half an hour, a little wetter, if that were possible, no muddier because that was not possible, with teeth chattering and fingers numbed with the cold. Carruthers lit the candle again, fumbled at his belt and produced an automatic pistol, took a box of cartridges from a niche in the wall, and proceeded to recharge his magazine. This done he counted the cartridges left in the box. "Curse!" he groaned. "Only ten rounds left. Lord knows what I'll do when they're gone."

Roberto ceased a moment to breathe heavily on his stiff chilled fingers. "Why d'you use the silly thing?" he mumbled. "Service revolver's much better."

"Why?" said Carruthers snappily. "Because there wasn't a service revolver to be had for love or money when I came out here. Had to take this or nothing—and pay ten pounds for it."

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"You were swindled," said Roberto. "Ordnance only charge a fiver for a service revolver."

"Ordnance!" said Carruthers scornfully. "Ordnance told me the price was five pounds, but they couldn't supply one at any price 'cos they hadn't got 'em. I wouldn't mind—this is good enough—but I can't get cartridges for it. Sent the money home for a hundred, and they write back and say cartridges can't be sent through the post. Quoted the Post Office Regulation at me. Pity they can't quote 'em at the Germs and stop their cartridges."

The subject dropped, and they sat shivering and talking over the scrimmage they had just come through, until a voice outside the curtain door called: "Mr. Carruthers there?"

"Hullo!" shouted Carruthers. "Yes, what is it?"

"Letters, sir. Ration party just brought up the mail," and a head and shoulders thrust inside the curtain.

"Aha, that's better," said Carruthers. "Thank Heaven for one spot of happiness in this muck heap. That all?" and his face dropped as he was handed one paper and a letter. Roberto received several, and he was on the point of tearing them open

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as Carruthers was his single one when there came another interruption of, "Mr. Carruthers, sir."

"Yes," Carruthers shouted again. "What is it now?"

"Chit for you, sir," and a dripping cap and head pushed in and Carruthers was handed a folded note. He read and groaned aloud. "Damn!" he said. "Oh, damn!"

"What's the row?" asked Roberto, looking up, and Carruthers flung the note to him. "Take a party out and overhaul the wire and scout round the neutral ground," he said bitterly and swore again. "I did think I was going to get a chance to sleep to-night; and now I'll be crawling round there in the mud amongst the dead 'uns for the rest of the night. It's too——" and he went off at a tangent again.

"Too bad," said Roberto sympathetically. "At once, it says too."

"I suppose I can read my one letter first," said Carruthers savagely, and picked it up again. "Or——" he hesitated a moment, wondering whether he'd reserve the pleasure and have it to look forward to when he came in next morning. But he could not deny himself, and ripped the envelope open.

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He studied it a moment, and then Roberto looked up in amazement at the following outburst. "Look at it; just look at it," raved Carruthers, flinging the note across. "Final demand—of all the infernal cheek."

"What on earth——" said Roberto, picking up the note and looking at it. ". . . . Oh, I say! Yes, this is a bit thick."

"Thick," snarled Carruthers. "An Income Tax notice, handed to a man in a filthy mud-hole of a front-line trench a hundred yards from the rotten Germs. . . . Nice mail for a man to have handed him, isn't it? Comforting sort of thing to take out with me crawling round the corpses in the neutral ground all night. . . ."

He subsided growling, and sat glowering at Roberto a moment.

"But here, old man," said Roberto soothingly, "there's something wrong here, isn't there? You've just told me you've no private income, but they're charging you tax on much more than your Army pay."

"More," shouted Carruthers, and snatched at the notice again. "I should dash well think they are. Don't you see what they've done? This amount they're assessing me on is my old screw in the business—the good

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income I gave up last year to take a measly two pounds a week in the Army. You know their useful old rule—assessing your next year's income at the rate of your last year's, or the average of the last three years—whichever pays them best. This is what a man gets for—— Oh, it's a grateful blessed country, isn't it?"

He looked up and just caught a glimpse of a faint smile twitching at the corners of Roberto's lips. The smile widened to a grin, and broke in a chuckle which Roberto struggled to turn off into a cough. Carruthers stared angrily at him, and the look on his face was too much for Roberto. The chuckle turned to a giggle, then to a laugh, and still looking at Carruthers's indignant, scowling face, Roberto collapsed and leaned back yelling peal on peal of laughter.

Carruthers looked amazed, angry, huffy by turns. But presently he glanced down at the obnoxious paper in his hand, up again at Roberto roaring laughter, and then he also began to grin, feebly at first, but—— In another moment he was rocking with laughter himself, and the two sat sputtering, trying to speak, breaking off into fresh spasms of merriment.

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"O Lord!" gasped Roberto at last, sitting up and wiping his eyes, "I haven't laughed so much——"

"It is—it is dash funny," gurgled Carruthers, "when you think of it. An income tax notice—on top of all to-day's performance—in this place—bullets and whizz-bangs and Huns over the way and a demand to stump up income tax on top of it all."

"O Lord! O Lord!" was all Roberto could say.

"But hold on," said Carruthers, bubbling over again. "It's my turn now. I'm going to—where's my indelible pencil—I'm going to send this back to 'em."

He found his pencil, wet it, and wrote heavily across the face of the notice. He handed it to Roberto and exploded with laughter again. "I only wish I could send a photo of this place along with it," he said.

Roberto read, and joined the laugh again.

In vivid purple the answer ran: "*If you want it, tell your Tax Collector to come here and get it.*"

A voice sounded outside—"Mr. Carruthers! Your party is ready waiting, sir."

"Coming," shouted Carruthers, and crawled out into the darkness and wet, still laughing.

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XVIII

THEIR FATHERS BEFORE THEM

I WARN you that in this tale you will find no word of the clash and crash of battle, of stirring deeds of heroism, of flying bullets or bare steel. But I think it is fairly entitled to a place in any record of the Old Contemptibles if only because it is about a man who is typical of many, of the generation that bred and built up the Regular Army which fought in this War; of a generation which, after giving its whole life and energy to the Service and the Country is left to-day, forgotten and neglected, to starve on a pittance, or die in the workhouse.

The Major (retired Royal Artillery) was nearly eighty when the War broke out, and having been a soldier all his days it is easy to understand how his thoughts were bound up with the Army, how eagerly he followed the reports of its work, and how desperately he wished he could have done something himself to serve his country.

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He had four sons, and quickly one after another joined up and went in turn to the Front, and the Major and his wife were left to read the papers, to swell with pride as word came of the steps of promotion of this son or that, to shrivel again at sight of the Casualty Lists, and to dread any knock at the door that sounded like a telegraph messenger's. They followed very rigorously all the Orders and Regulations that in time came out, fared inadequately but thankfully on the scanty rations, and would have economised as they were urged to do if a pension based on pay rates of a hundred years ago had left any further room for economy.

Their main personal interest in life lay in the flying visits of their sons home on leave, and in the conserving of the nation's food supply by the growing of potatoes in the patch of a back garden. It is true that the Major was indefatigable in puzzling out ways and means in which he could serve the country. The tales of other "dug-outs" being taken into harness gave him a spasm of hope, and for long he wrote all sorts of old Army and War Office comrades, his Member of Parliament and various other powers, offering his services for Remounts, or to

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take charge of stores, or for any job on earth connected with the War.

When all this failed of results he unearthed old Indian native remedies and horse-doctoring tips and sent them in to the Veterinary Department, and then for a time drove his wife distracted by pottering round the kitchen brewing concoctions from various grains in accordance with another old Indian recipe, bottling off the compounds, taking them along to the baker and pestering him to bake special bread with his decoctions added, and finally shipped off the loaves to the Commissariat people, pointing out that they would keep fresh for umpteen months, and urging that they accept his recipe and use it for the benefit of the troops in the trenches.

When one of the Gunner sons came along—the Major had served all his life in the Artillery—he revelled in tales of Artillery doings at the Front, and delved deep into such modern mysteries as "indirect fire" and "sound ranging," picking up and understanding the intricacies of such matters with astonishing quickness. And after the son had gone the Major would sit up until all hours of the night fiddling about with old shell fuses and bits

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of brass and a file and pliers trying to puzzle out improvements for the use of the Artillery, and covering a deal of paper with drawings and specifications. The latter he found difficult work on account of the shakiness of his hand, which *would* turn a straight line into a long, wavering zig-zag, while anything remotely resembling a circle could only be accomplished by the aid of pennies and other coins. You have no idea of the difficulties of making drawings to scale when the whole drawing has to be so scaled that the circles in it are limited to sizes running from a threepenny piece to half-a-crown.

It was almost a pity that the Major had not been given a job as Recruiting Officer or one of those Military Representatives whose work it was to chase men into the Service. If he didn't get the pay he certainly earned it a hundred times over if energy and enthusiasm count for anything, and he must have made himself heartily detested by any men he knew who had not joined up without good reason, especially since this was in a small provincial town where everybody knew almost everybody else and all their life and family histories.

Then came the time when local bodies of

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Volunteers were raised from men too old or infirm for active service, and those who for one reason or another could not, or would not, get into khaki and serve as soldiers.

Volunteers! You can imagine how the old Major jumped for a chance. It was true he might not be much good these days on a long route march; but at least he could show these others a tip or two that would be useful, and anyhow he must be of some value as a drilled man, even if it was only to show these youngsters — sixty and seventy year-old youngsters, some of them—how to stand at attention and give an order. He waited eagerly and impatiently for a body of the Volunteers to be raised in the town. It was at last announced that one was to be formed, but to the Major the announcement came as a shock and in its way was a terrible tragedy. The local body was to be a Company of Volunteer Infantry.

Properly to understand the tragedy you must look back over and consider the Major's history, service and tradition. First, last and all the time he was an Artilleryman, a Gunner, and a Horse Gunner at that.

He had gone to India as a youngster of eighteen in the days when a man sailing for

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there said Good-bye and meant it—as it usually was—for good; the days when troops on their first landing had pay stopped until they had covered the cost of their Indian cotton clothing and their coffins, and as a rule soon needed both. Even in the Mutiny days, when he first knew the country, the deaths from battle were a mere item compared to the loss from cholera, typhoid and fever of all kinds, and you can understand how a man's chances of withstanding disease stood in the face of such a doctrine as the common one that rum was the best preventitive and cure of fever, and when comfort and hygiene were typified in the uniform the Major had to wear on full dress parades—tight breeches, a close-fitting shell jacket smothered in rows and loops and knots of heavy braid and a huge brass helmet with a big curved comb like our Fire Brigade wear, and with long streaming scarlet horse-hair tails. This was the uniform of the Royal (Bengal) Horse Artillery, the unit in which the Major first served, and in which, like most men with their first unit, he for the rest of his life took the highest interest and pride. In the old Regular Service a man did take a most tremendous pride in his regiment and

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every man grew up in a firm and fostered belief that his particular unit was the best of its branch and his branch was the best of the Army. So the Major, after the usual fashion, was raised in adoration of the Artillery in general, of the Horse Artillery in particular, and of the "Chestnut Troop," R.H.A., *in excelsis*.

He served a full term in the purgatory of the Indian plains, came home, married a young girl whose brothers and uncles and other relations were in the Gunners, and so had brought her up in the True Faith of Gunners, took his bride straight to military camp, and afterwards back with him to India. There children were born to them and raised always in camp, barracks, or cantonments of the Artillery, and when they came home again the Major was posted Adjutant of Artillery Volunteers and passed scores and scores of recruits into the Regular Service and trained hundreds of others as Volunteer Artillery. When he retired he was forced to abandon his soldiering and take up a "civilian job," because his pension was inadequate for his support; but then and after, when failing health made him drop all work, he never lost his pride in the Service

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or ceased to think of himself as a soldier, and a Gunner.

All this may help you to understand a little the blow it was to him to discover that he must give what small remaining service he could to the country as an Infantryman—or remain outside the Volunteers even. He tried at first to point out to the authorities how much better it would be to have a body of Artillery trained there, and did his best to influence other leading citizens to implore the Government to make them Artillerymen. The Major pointed out to them how important the Artillery had been in this War, read to them with tremendous pride any phrases in the papers about a "Gunners' War," and so on, and struggled to work them up to some slight semblance of his own belief and pride in the Gunners. But all his arguments he had to confess beaten by the simple explanation that no guns could be spared Volunteers there for training, that every gun was needed for the line. This was unanswerable, particularly as the Major would gladly have cut off his head to send it to the line if they could have found any use for it.

He joined their Volunteers, of course, after talking it over with his wife, who naturally

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was just about as complete and tradition-steeped a Gunner as himself. It was a sad come-down perhaps, considering the hundreds of men in this very town he had recruited into the Gunners or impressed with the fact that the Royal Regiment was the finest and greatest Regiment in the world, and how often he had asserted his pride that his whole service had been in the Gunners, that his sons and all his friends in the Service had been Gunners, and so on. But after all it was war, and for the good of the country, and if the country gave him no chance to volunteer in the Artillery and preferred to have him in the Infantry, he must go, as any soldier would, where he was most wanted. And, after all, these Infantry had done some very good work in this campaign, and it was no real discredit even for a Horse Gunner. . . .

The Major joined, and since he was no Infantryman and professed no knowledge of their job he ought to begin at the beginning and learn right through. He joined as a Private.

He got along fairly well through the first winter. The summer was trying, especially on hot days, when a doubtful heart made drill rather heavy for an old man. But the

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second winter was the worst. Again and again he had to miss drills because of nasty colds or a touch of bronchitis, or a turn of heart, stopped his attendance. But every possible Sunday he turned up on parade and went through the afternoon drill, a little bit short in the step perhaps, slightly shaky at the knees, a bit doubtful about his sight, apt to miss an order unless it was shouted very loud and clear and NOT on his deaf side; but with his old back as flat, his head as erect, his shoulders as well set back as ever they were in his palmiest days when he clanked on parade and stood to attention with his old "Chestnut Troop" of the Royal Horse Artillery.

The Infantry drill he confessed bothered him—their fashion so different from mounted drill of Forming Fours, this absurd new way they had of Standing at Ease, and all these other new-fangled "and not nearly as good as the old way, sir" ideas. But he was too old a soldier to let his Company down at drill, and an old Gunner on parade must set a good example; and, after all, Goodness knew he'd told recruits enough in his time how they could help themselves by close study of the Drill Book. So he fell back on the

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Drill Book. His own old books were no good, although he turned some of them out and looked them over, forgetting for an hour at a time what he was looking for and losing himself in delightful re-readings of ancient mysteries of par-buckling and correct use of handspikes and methods of mounting and dismounting a 60-pounder Muzzle-Loader.

But he got hold of the red Infantry Drill Book, and at nights you could find him sitting by the fire opposite his wife with his book tilted at the best angle to catch the light, his specs firm on his nose, his brow furrowed, sweating up the Infantry "Form Fours" or "Firing Exercise."

It was a hard winter for the old couple, what with substitute bread, and shortage of milk and meat and all the other nourishing requirements of old bodies, with doctors' and chemists' bills mounting, and difficulty even —to say nothing of the price—in getting the ration of whisky the doctor insisted on. But hard and all as it might be, with prices rising, rates and taxes rising, everything rising except a fixed and scanty pension, it was the War, and they agreed thankfully that "it was worse in the trenches."

It was a pity the drills were so apt to give

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an old man colds and so on, but wet or shine, rain or sleet or snow, the Major trudged to his drill and missed no one that he wasn't kept from by real illness or the flat orders of his doctor. One never knew . . . at least he'd be able to sit in a trench and fire a few shots if need be . . . and meantime perhaps he was setting an example to younger and fitter men who might have shirked the boring business of drills, but couldn't for very shame, knowing he would be there.

So to the end he kept on, grinding up his Drill Book, appearing on parade, falling in, numbering off from the right, shouldering a dummy rifle—retired Major of the Royal Regiment of Artillery, and Private of the Volunteer Infantry.

Maybe there is nothing much—except truth and a tiny tribute—in this story. But at least I think it will be appreciated by the Old Contemptibles themselves, by the men who know how much the Army of 1914 owes to the spirit, the training, discipline and tradition that made it what it was, and that was built up, added to, carried on and stamped into the Service, by the Old Guard.

The country knows well and is not likely to forget what our New, our Empire Armies

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did; it is as little likely to forget who taught and trained and built them and set them their standard—the British Regular Army, the men of '14, the Old Contemptibles. And it is no more than fair and fitting that the country should remember too the men of the Mutiny, of Egypt and India and Afghanistan, those veterans who did their full share in the almost forgotten wars of their day, who eagerly did what little they could in this war and would gladly have given their lives for a chance to do more, the men who hold a full share in our greatest triumph in that they bred and brought up in all their great traditions the Regular Army of our day, were the makers and mentors of the Old Contemptibles—Their Fathers before Them.

THE END

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RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BRUNSWICK ST., STAMFORD ST., S.E. 1,
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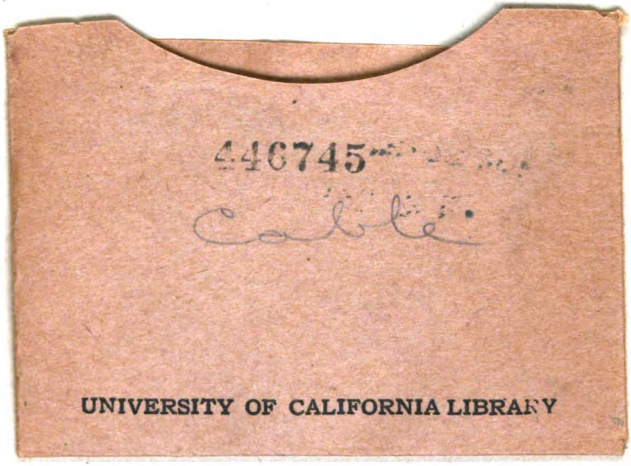
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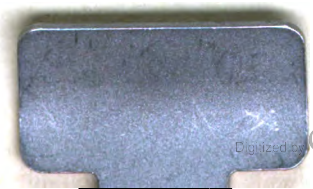

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